Daisy's Adventures 4: Mechanical Menace

By: Lucent Shadow

A lot can change in just eight months. Upon returning from a special mission, Daisy finds herself in a transforming and rapidly evolving society. All seems well at first glance, but trouble pops up before long. For the sake of their precious world, Daisy and her Kruna team – or what's left of it – must confront a cult on the rise shrouded in mystery and bent on global revolution.

Status: complete

Published: 2018-04-20

Updated: 2019-12-31

Words: 247137

Chapters: 58

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Fantasy/Adventure - Characters: Daisy, Bowser, OC - Reviews: 45 - Favs: 18 - Follows: 17

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12910096/1/Daisy-s-Adventures-4-Mechanical-Menace

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Daisy's Adventures 4: Mechanical Menace

Introduction
Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII
Chapter XIX
Chapter XX
Chapter XXI
Chapter XXII
Chapter XXIII
Chapter XXIV
Chapter XXV
Chapter XXVI
Chapter XXVII

Chapter XXVIII
Chapter XXIX
Chapter XXX
Chapter XXXI
Chapter XXXII
Chapter XXXIII
Chapter XXXIV
Chapter XXXV
Chapter XXXVI
Chapter XXXVII
Chapter XXXVIII
Chapter XXXIX
Chapter XL
Chapter XLI
Chapter XLII
Chapter XLIII
Chapter XLIV
Chapter XLV
Chapter XLVI
Chapter XLVII
Chapter XLVIII
Chapter XLIX
Chapter L
Chapter LI
Chapter LII
Chapter LIII
Chapter LIV
Chapter LV
Chapter LVI
Chapter LVII
Chapter LVIII - FINAL

Chapter I

Mechanical Menace

World 0-1: Journey to a Land of the Past **:**

The blizzard continued to blanket the mountain trail with frigid white as the lone figure marched her way up the ascent. In the expanse of whiteness, her standard earth wielder getup stood out; a black cap-sleeve shirt and black pants – both with silver accents – her silver boots, and all four of her black ankle and wrist weights. This particular uniform scheme had gone through elemental shrines and even warped through time. The large black, weather-retardant cloak from her time in the future went over her auburn, shoulder-length hair and shrouded all of her face but her mouth in darkness as it draped around her lithe, muscular form. Her normally perky and spirited expression was absent and replaced with calm intensity, for her current journey called for the utmost seriousness. And although her team had accomplished great victories as a unit, she undertook this particular venture on her own. Her lone travel partner returned home not long after the outset of their journey.

Though her partner left, it actually worked out in her favor in that it would make her harder to track as a person traveling solo. In fact, she intended for her cloak to keep her identity hidden. She could not risk anyone following her before she reached her goal.

The early July air of the far Southern Hemisphere chilled the mountain landscape in an arctic freeze, and the howling winds made for diagonal precipitation in randomized directions. Regardless, this being did not stop or turn back. Her mission was too significant to abandon, and she did not have it in her to give up. At just twenty-two years of age, she had emerged victorious in her elemental odyssey, her return home, and her crusade in the future; and yet, there was still much to do at twenty-three. What awaited near the top of the mountain range could shed light on the ominous presences that remain in the background.

The Master Blacksmiths, Arka Knight had said to her in the future. *They're the ones who created all the Alkemei Pendants of Power, including the Master Pendant. You will have to find their forge, which I will give you direction to. No one else knows where it is. The Blacksmiths have been dead for eons. By the time I came into existence, their location had become lost history. It is only through some otherworldly assistance that I learned of its whereabouts.*

The pink-gray sky overhead occluded the early evening sun in its entirety. A gust kicked up that threatened to roll her down the snow-covered trail, but she gripped her hood and pressed on. Despite her relatively light apparel, she did not shiver or seem bothered at all by the cold. Yet, the snow blowing all around had long since become an annoyance. Even though she did not mind the chill itself, she decided to pick up the pace, youthful but determined in her stride. She still had at least another two miles to go.

Arka Knight's words from the future reverberated in her head as she neared her target. *The Master Blacksmiths dubbed it the 'Alkemei Vranzer.' It's supposedly the true very last Alkemei they ever made, and it was thought to have 'fate-altering powers.' But it was never used. It never left their forge, and its existence is entirely unknown – to everyone who's still alive, anyways. So if you find the city in which the forge resided, you will find the Vranzer. In this timeline, Kokoro somehow had discovered the ruins and destroyed the Vranzer along with the entire area. But in your time, the ruins still stand. Because of that, the Vranzer should still be there as well. Go and obtain possession of it when you return to your time, Kruna Daisy. And when you find it, do not let anyone else get a hold of it. Do not let anyone destroy it either; but if presented with a dilemma, destroying it is better than letting someone else take it. If you have to cement the Vranzer to your neck to make sure no one else takes it, then so be it; because if the Vranzer works, the results of it falling into the wrong hands could potentially be disastrous.*

The snowfall let up and became drifting flurries as Daisy passed through the gated walls and entered the ancient city of the Master Blacksmiths. The earth wielder kept her hood on but lifted its shadow from her eyes as she glanced around to survey her

weathered environment. It was a magnificent metropolis – or rather, it once was, and had now become an aged city in ruins. Daisy could not sense anyone nearby, making her wonder if the area was completely abandoned.

The Alkemei Forge resides within a city in the Snowhead Mountains , Arka Knight had told her. *You'll have to brave the harsh cold of the southernmost region of the world to get there. The forge was run by eight blacksmiths – one of each element – who crafted not only some of the finest elemental tools around, but who also were the lone creators of the Alkemei Pendants of Power. These eight, the Master Blacksmiths, created many Alkemei of varying degrees of ability, utility, and rarity. The Master Pendant was made near the tail end of their lives. Though their intentions in making the gem were not at all analogous with what ended up transpiring, the Master Pendant is still believed to be the most powerful of the Alkemei ever created. At least, recorded in history. The Vranzer, the very last Alkemei made, could indeed surpass it.*

Empty buildings, houses, and shops lined the streets. The architecture and technology was archaic, at least several hundreds of years outdated. Almost everything had been damaged in some way, whether from the course of time or from some attack. She hoped that Kokoro had not found this place already, but Arka Knight had said that the Kokoro of the future had annihilated the entire area. The city as it stood in her vision appeared as if it had suffered some mass attack ages ago, not in recent times.

"Anybody wanna tell me where the Alkemei Forge is?!" Daisy blurted out. Her rough, raspy voice disrupted the ambience of the vicinity. She stood still to give a quick look around in her periphery. The only movement she noticed was from that of the flurries. "No? Anybody wanna try and ambush me?" She heard next-to-nothing; and again, she could not for the life of her sense a single energy signature. With a smile, she said nothing more and resumed her walk; content to know that she really was the only being there.

Built around and on a plateau near the top of the Snowhead Mountains, there was no mistaking the importance that this citadel-like town of the Master Blacksmiths once had in the distant past. Many of the structural designs prominently featured all eight

elemental symbols. A massive but dismantled stadium occupied much of the northern side of town. Most of the streets were wide and spacious to accommodate what was once a thriving, lively population. With its strategic, remote location in an otherwise intolerable section of the world, Daisy could see how the ruins had evaded modern knowledge and escaped society's awareness.

Following an extended bout of searching through the abandoned city, Daisy caught sight of something to the north and past the stadium. There was a huge building at the top of a short climb of stairs. She could barely make out a blurry sign of an Alkemei Pendant from where she stood. Pulling on the front end of her hood, she started on her way for what she believed to be the Alkemei Forge.

The ascent of stairs brought Daisy to the entrance of the Alkemei Forge. She went to push through the front doors, but they did not move. They were bolted shut and made of some combination of stone and metal. If Athelstan had come with her, he could have manipulated the door with ease; but since he had not, Daisy had to come up with an alternative means of getting in. Naturally, she took a step back and wound up to throw a punch and bust her way in. Despite the strength behind her hit, she only managed to bring about a dent and a loud thud that echoed back down to the city.

Why did I think I could just bust in, she muttered in her mind. *It's so obvious. The Master Blacksmiths had to have made their forge as tough and impenetrable as they could to protect whatever's inside.*

So instead of trying to find another entrance or some sort of key, Daisy slammed into the doors with another punch almost twice as forceful as the first. Her attack warped the doors a bit, but they still held up. She shook out her hand, for that last punch had made her knuckles sore.

"Why are you being so stubborn, you dumb doors?!" yelled Daisy. "You're frickin' centuries old! You should be weak!"

She stood there for a moment, as if waiting for the doors to respond

to her. Now growing more impatient, she pulled some soil, mud, and permafrost from underneath the snow and compacted them around her left hand. With a swift, hardening action, she converted the earth elementals into crystal to make her signature Crystal Fist and charged at the doors to deliver a smashing blow. The doors ripped off the hinges with ease, granting her access inside. Smirking, she dematerialized her Crystal Fist and waltzed inside.

The Alkemei Forge was a single massive chamber with various areas and sections. The lack of lighting inside and the dark sky outside made for a very dim environment. The few lightstones along the walls did little to add illumination, but it made no difference for Daisy. The night vision ability earth wielders possessed ensured she knew what she would be doing regardless of the lighting.

As she perused through the chamber and scanned over the tables, aged equipment, and abandoned stations, one chest caught her eye. This chest in particular was unique in that while the entire city at the top of the Snowhead Mountains and everything in the Alkemei Forge had experienced advanced aging of several hundred – and possibly, thousands – of years, the chest did not seem to have experienced anything more than an accumulation of dust. It felt out of place; but at the same time, it felt as if it belonged there, as if it was meant to be there in that position, throughout time, waiting for someone to come across it and take what was within.

With a wide-arcing kick, Daisy snapped the lock off the chest, allowing the top to swing up and open. She bent over, almost tumbling into the chest itself, to pick up the lone metal box that sat inside and flicked open the tiny lever holding it closed. Within rested an Alkemei Pendant of Power much like those her and the other Kruna Yura possessed; a large, colorless gem – when not worn – encased in a strong metal frame and bound with a thick, durable cord. Daisy was not sure, but she felt the gem calling out to her; though not with the malevolent, wicked undertone the Master Pendant – or, as she learned in the future, the Alkemei Ankh – had. Despite no known being bound to the gem, it still seemed...sentient in some way.

"Put that back, earth wielder," said a spectral voice.

"That does not belong to you," said another similar, feminine voice.

Well, way to state the obvious, Daisy thought. She turned around to face the center of the chamber, where two holograph-like apparitions stared her down. They were both in some combination of ornamental robes, light armor, and suits; the tall man dressed in navy blue, light blue, and gold, and the broad but lanky woman in black, purple, and white. Radiant, neon blue orbs occupied their empty eye sockets as they hovered in the air.

"Who are you?" the male spirit demanded. "State your business in here."

Daisy pulled down the hood of her cloak to fully reveal her head. "I'm Daisy Sarasa, a Kruna. Why don't you state your business here? I don't recall asking to get annoyed."

"The opening of our sacred chest woke us," the female spirit said. "We are not any more nuisances than you."

"I am Nakima, Master Blacksmith of Water," said the male spirit.

"And I am Kali, Master Blacksmith of Shadow," said the female spirit. "Why are you trespassing on our sacred grounds?"

"Why are the sacred doors ripped from the frame and obliterated?" Nakima asked.

"It wasn't me," Daisy flatly said, eyes darting around the room. "It was like that when I got here... There was a blizzard earlier with gusty winds and...stuff."

"Fair enough, Kruna of Earth," said Nakima. "But for future reference, these grounds are not for you mortals or any of your kind. This sector in particular is our eternal resting place. Please return the Alkemei in your hands to its rightful storage."

"Sorry," said Daisy. "I need to take this with me."

"What? You dare steal from the Master Blacksmiths?" Nakima asked.

"If that's what you wanna call it, then yes," replied the Kruna of Earth. "I'm going to 'steal' from you guys. It's to my understanding that this pendant is supposed to be really powerful, possibly even more than the Master Pendant. That's why I need to take it, because the Master Pendant's in some very bad hands right about now."

"We expected as much," said Kali. "What you fools have done with the Master Pendant is none of our concern. What the Master Pendant became is not anywhere near what we eight had in mind for it. What you have allowed to happen to it is on your hands, not ours. Society has managed to survive up until now, has it not? The Alkemei in your hand must remain here. Please put it back."

"Oh c'mon!" Daisy yelled. "I didn't venture all the way here just to come up empty handed! What should it matter to you guys?"

"It is the Alkemei Vranzer, a special pendant to us that we must guard," said Nakima.

"It is the true ultimate of the Alkemei," said Kali. "As the final and most substantial of our Alkemei, we have to preserve its holiness, purity, and integrity. Before our passing, each of us eight Master Blacksmiths donated a portion of our life force to the Vranzer's power in the hopes that a part of us all would live on with our work."

"And because of this, the Vranzer rejects those unworthy of wearing it," said Nakima. "Our fellow brothers and sisters entrusted us to keep it safe from intruders like you."

"Nobody said anything about *me* wearing it," Daisy muttered.

"Doesn't matter," said Kali. "You're not leaving here until you put that Alkemei back. Please adhere to the wishes of us Master Blacksmiths. Just because you obtained possession of the Orianthi doesn't mean you have any right to take the Vranzer."

Daisy glanced as low towards her neck as her eyes would go, remembering that she did indeed have the Alkemei Orianthi, Pendant of Reanimation and the predecessor to the Alkemei Ankh, equipped at that very moment. Her eyes then drifted to the Vranzer in her hands. There was no telling what kinds of powers or abilities

the Vranzer possessed. But at the same time, it looked so clean and pure; *innocent,* even. She unconsciously made a warm smile out of a deep inhale through her nose. If only for a brief instant, she felt as though the Alkemei's gem smiled back.

"We will not return to our rest until you replace the Alkemei Vranzer back in its casing and chest," said Nakima.

"Well..." Daisy murmured. "What if I put it on, and I prove that *I* can wear it?"

"You may try, but it will reject you and detach the moment you put it on," said Kali.

"That is a certainty, Kruna," said Nakima. "Don't be surprised when it falls off."

Without any hesitation, Daisy calmly undid her Orianthi and clipped the Vranzer's cord around her neck. Nakima and Kali stared at the Kruna of Earth, expecting their pendant to slip off her neck at any moment. Much to their surprise, it did not and remained attached to Daisy as she tightened the cord to make the pendant's fit firm and snug. The Vranzer's colorless gem then turned black, signaling its synchronization with Daisy's elemental earth energy.

"Alright, so how does this thing work?" Daisy asked, still fiddling with the cord. "Is this one automatic?"

"Kali, are you seeing this?" Nakima barely managed to ask. "How is this possible..."

"This is unreal!" Kali exclaimed. "We never thought anyone would be able to wear it! We didn't think any of *us* would be able to wear it!"

Daisy shrugged as she stuck her Orianthi into her Hammerspace Belt. "I just sorta looked at it and it just...I don't know, really. I just put it on, I guess."

Nakima and Kali were quiet for a little while, both dumbstruck over the development. They stared at the smiling Kruna of Earth before them and the Alkemei Vranzer that did not appear ready to fall off anytime soon. The thought of an earth wielder like her wearing the

Vranzer baffled them, but Daisy paid no mind to their surprise. The comforting feeling the Vranzer inspired held her focus.

"Perhaps we misjudged you," Nakima said, quiet and composed. "Or, we may have misjudged our Alkemei."

"Could we really have done that?" Kali murmured. "And why her? I don't understand..."

"That's cool," said Daisy, her tone similar. "I know I'm not perfect, not by a long shot; and first impressions are not necessarily my forte."

"And yet, here you are, wearing our Vranzer," replied Kali. "I am beyond confused. Nakima, I say we just kill her like the rest that tried. This has to be a mistake."

"This is no mistake," Nakima responded.

"Then this has to be some sort of accident," said Kali. "The Vranzer must be misidentifying-"

"There are no accidents when it comes to fate," said Nakima. "And this *is* the Pendant of Fate."

"Does she look or feel like anyone of the elite from our time?" Kali barked.

"No, but she could very well be an elite of this time," said Nakima. "My dear sister, it may be time to let this Alkemei of ours go."

Kali frowned at him. "Are you telling me you're comfortable with letting our pendant, the only thing that remains of us and our brothers and sisters in this physical realm, walk after all of these years? And with a complete stranger?"

"The Vranzer will go where it needs to go, I'm sure. We know not of its true destiny."

"And if corruption shall befall it? Then what?"

"If the world should succumb to the malevolent shroud of the beings

lurking in the background at this very moment, then corruption, decay, and plenty worse will overrun all – including our Vranzer. You remember what Osiris and the Shadow Queen did in our time, don't you? The current solution is not sufficient enough in the long-term. At some point, those threats must be silenced for good."

The two Master Blacksmith spirits looked at each other, Kali at a loss for words. Daisy just stood there, straight and tall, without a single bit of worry to be seen, reminiscent of a young child who expected nothing but the best. It took the two spirits a few moments, but Kali gave a nod to Nakima. He nodded in turn.

"You are a very curious one, Daisy," said Nakima. "Quite peculiar... I think we will entrust you with our treasure."

"That's great to hear," replied Daisy. "Thank you both. I really appreciate it. I'll take real great care of it, I promise."

"You *better* take care of it," said Kali. "If you don't, then you will have played a part in bringing your world to ruin."

Daisy peered down at the Alkemei around her neck. "So what's its ability?"

"That's a great question," said Nakima. "We don't know."

"What?!" Daisy screamed. "You mean you made it and you don't know?!"

Nakima nodded. "We made it with the hopes of it having fate-altering properties, but it never realized its full potential. Perhaps, seeing as how it did not reject you, you may know what it needs in order to awaken and cultivate its latent capacities?"

"Unless of course, now you question its value and worth..." Kali said.

"What? No way!" Daisy exclaimed, calm in her tone. "This is a great honor. I'm sure this Alkemei has some sort of nascent power that I just can't imagine until I witness or experience it for myself. Maybe it just needs some time and care is all."

Kali looked at Nakima, murmuring, "Time and care..."

A few moments passed, and Nakima and Kali both felt more confident in their decision to let Daisy walk with the Vranzer. What could potentially be the most powerful of all of their creations now sat strapped to Daisy's neck, though her lighthearted mood would not have suggested as much.

"Then the Vranzer is now your responsibility," said Nakima.

"You now hold the remaining essence of us Master Blacksmiths," said Kali. "Guard it with your life, Kruna Daisy."

The spirits of Nakima, Master Blacksmith of Water, and Kali, Master Blacksmith of Shadow, faded from view, returning to their slumber. When they were gone, Daisy found herself alone once more; only this time, she now had in her possession the culmination of a several months-long journey littered with more detours than she would have preferred. She sighed as she turned around to face the entrance of the Alkemei Forge, at ease but with many questions filling her mind.

Chapter II

The Unholy Enemy Strikes! Again! **:**

With the Vranzer put away and hidden in her Hammerspace Belt and her Orianthi now reequipped, Daisy hurried out of the remains of the ancient city. She had acquired what she had set out to attain, so she now could leave and return to the Mushroom Kingdom. There was little to gain from lingering in the area and taking in the scenery compared to what she could lose. Already, she could feel an energy signature of extensive power closing in on her.

And upon rising up over a mound at the top of a massive, lengthy downslope, she saw him. The vile, vampiric being standing six and a half feet tall with a slender yet masculine build lurched his way towards the summit from a distance. His smooth, deep brown scales with a bold and distinct purple shine took the place of skin, and an exposed, case-like bone structure protruded along the whole length and circumference of both his natural arm and prosthetic arm, his legs, and his neck. His intricate gold and dark brown form-fitting tunic and his gunmetal gray pants that led into brown shoes gave the impression of a stone wielder, but this particular being inspired no surprise when bursts of light formed on his blade-like claws.

Despite the lightening snowfall, Daisy could not make out the pale periwinkle complexion his demonic head held from where she was at that moment. Still, she had a strong feeling he had spotted her. Otherwise, he would not have flared the glowing golden bursts that he did. Her mono-black earth wielder getup stood out too much in a land of white to not miss. When she noticed him advancing towards her, she stood her ground.

Kokoro said nothing before slinging his light bursts in Daisy's direction. She had ample time to sidestep one and hook a deflective punch into the other. On its way into the ground, the batted burst burned through snow and chipped into the mountain rock lying underneath. A similar outcome occurred from the octagram of light Daisy just barely rolled out of that blared a wall of glowing power

skyward from under where she was. As Daisy got to her feet out of her evasion and shook off the snow that stuck to her, Kokoro continued advancing her way.

"I've been getting really tired of running into you," said Daisy.

"Then quit running away," Kokoro responded.

Out of a single arm thrust, a column of light rushed at Daisy. The Kruna Yura of Earth leapt over it and cracked herself into a lateral-moving twist, her evasion successful as more snow and mountain rock burst into the air upon her landing.

"I'm not running away," Daisy said. "You're the one that's been stalking me."

"And you've been trying your damnedest to lose me," grumbled Kokoro. "But wherever you go, I will find you."

Daisy clenched her fists and focused seismic power into them, her eyes drifting to the Master Pendant still fastened to his neck. "I know, and it's totally annoying."

"Just what are you doing all the way out here at the bottom of the world in the first place?" asked Kokoro. "There's nothing here and nobody around for kilometers upon miles."

Daisy stayed silent. Ironically, that could have been the worst thing she could have done short of outright telling him the motives driving her trek.

Kokoro frowned. "Wait a minute – there *is* something out here, isn't there? Further up these peaks? Is there a summit? Is that where you're coming back from? Oh, why am I asking you all of this – you're not even going to tell me about any of it, are you?"

"Nope."

"Then I'll just have to see for myself."

"Go ahead. I doubt you'll find anything of interest there."

Kokoro smirked. "Why do I have a feeling that I will?"

Daisy smirked back. "Because you're crazy."

In an instant, Kokoro's expression darkened. He raised his left arm and extended all of his fingers at Daisy, white light forming at each of his claw tips. The five individual lasers all fired at Daisy, scattering ever so slightly on their way towards her. She had little time to react, but she front flipped over the fast-moving thin beams and avoided the burn damage that would have resulted from contact.

The moment she landed, Daisy brought her still-charged hands back and thrust them ahead at her opponent. Her quick Seismic Wave rushed out of her now half-closed fists at Kokoro, only for the demon to put up his arms to block. His defense did not blunt all of Daisy's attack, but it guarded against the lion's share of it. He did not let the rumbles that bypassed his block shake him up too much, for Daisy had already sprang at him with a leg up and ready to slam down. The Soul Stealer absorbed the force of her ax kick on impact with his guard and forced her off of him with ease.

After getting pushed back, Daisy readied more seismic power. This time, she kept the concentration limited to her right hand. Kokoro took the time to flare the beginnings of a light aura around him, but Daisy rushed at him before he could raise more power from his energy reserves. Kokoro backpedaled and again got his guard up, but Daisy's Breaker Punch breached his defense. The seismic power that crunched out of her swinging fist split Kokoro's arms apart from one another the instant before her punch came arcing down, paving the way for a mild but clean hit. The successive thirty-two rapid jabs of her Flurry Punch tacked onto the accumulating harm, and a hard opposite-arm elbow strike to his abdomen finished the combo and sent him flopping into the snowy slope.

Angered, Kokoro sprang to his feet and executed a swift series of hand signs before pulling back his prosthetic arm. A spinning swirl of light materialized on the arm, resembling a curved, four-pointed shuriken revolving at high speed. Daisy stepped away and set up to evade whatever the Soul Stealer had in mind to do with his newly formed technique.

Kokoro rushed at Daisy and slung his Shine Shuriken at her, the momentum from his movement adding to his projectile's speed. The move confused her, for she saw what appeared to be a ranged throwing technique executed as if intended as a melee move and then hurled as a projectile anyways. As a result, the shuriken clipped her in her leg out of her late evasive jump. That gave Kokoro enough time to leap at her and knee her low in her abdomen. Kokoro returned to the snowy ground on his feet, but Daisy fell on her stomach. If not for the quickness she utilized in rolling to the side and to her knees, the light laser Kokoro shot off would have burned through her instead of into the mountainside.

"We've done this whole bit over countless times in the past several months," said Kokoro. "I personally think that this is getting quite stale, so do us both a favor and just die already!"

"You're trying to kill me, right?" asked Daisy. "Why don't you ask yourself why you keep failing?"

"Because even if I keep failing, you're going to slip up at some point," said Kokoro. "You're not perfect. Just like a few moments ago when you made a bad read. You can't keep fending me off forever. Even now, I can tell you're getting really tired. Fatigue is weighing you down, Sarasa."

Daisy grimaced, for she did not think Kokoro would notice her low vitality. The quest to find the ancient city of the Master Blacksmiths had worn her down to a substantial degree. The numerous encounters with Kokoro along the way certainly did not help. A long journey filled with plenty of distractions had not been kind to her, and she knew it. Unfortunately, so did Kokoro.

"One of these days, I *will* catch you off guard," said Kokoro. "Whether that's today, or at some point in the future. And then, it'll be all over for you. This is beyond revenge and more expansive than vengeance... This is *revengeance* ."

"That...sounded kind of lame," muttered Daisy.

"Go to Hell," Kokoro growled. "This has been my *revengeance tour* , and it will never finish until *you're* finished!"

The great Master Pendant, the Alkemei Ankh, flared a flowing pink and light blue aura out and through Kokoro, rejuvenating him as Daisy watched on in increasing fatigue. With each passing moment, Daisy's odds of survival dwindled. So long as the being sealed inside the Ankh cooperated with Kokoro, he would possess a far greater reservoir of power than Daisy could hope to stay competitive for long against. Going into Nova Form would not do much to help that right now.

But an idea came to her that did prompt her into making her transformation. With a fierce uprising of earth power, she initiated her Nova Form power-up. Her hair jutted out into chunky spikes in front of her and behind her, pushing the hood of her cloak off of her head. A bronze sheen glossed over her skin, black talon markings formed under the far ends of her eyes, and the irises of her eyes turned gold. Kokoro paid no mind to the transformation he had seen plenty of times already and instead kept his focus on the Ankh feeding him more power.

With the uptick in energy, Nova Daisy raised a fist and siphoned a hefty amount of seismic power through it. Considering the lack of earth in her current environment and the time and energy it would take to create earth, Daisy had to rely on the properties of seismic-based techniques and abilities. But despite that, she could still manipulate their current battlefield on the slopes of the snowy mountain.

Just as the Ankh finished feeding Kokoro power, Daisy whipped around and fired off her Shotgun attack. The thrust of her seismic-charged fist unleashed a wide-sweeping swath of earth power at the mountain and snow above them. Under the rumbling tremors of the Shotgun, parts of the upper mounds of snow broke off and began tumbling down.

The moment he saw the makings of an avalanche take shape, Kokoro flinched and turned to take off down the slope. "You moron! Why did you do that?!"

Using her impressive speed and agility, Daisy cut around the side of the mountain slope and out of the way of the falling rush of snow that hastened and widened its scope as it slid further down. Before

too long, Daisy's relatively small disturbance had grown into a far-reaching ripple of accelerating snow columns. Though she could see Kokoro sprinting down the mountain for a while, the worsening avalanche eventually caught up to and overtook him. Daisy stood there and watched the rumbling wall of snow drop several thousands of feet down to the point where she lost sight of it in the low visibility of the region's snowfall.

Daisy breathed a sigh of relief and powered out of her Nova Form back to normal. "That went better than I thought it would."

At least, temporarily, it did. She doubted getting caught in the avalanche would deter him for long, but she felt fine with at least getting rid of him for the time being. When she noticed more of the snow start tumbling off from higher up, Daisy decided then and there that she needed to get moving along. Her Shotgun might have set off something more than just the initial avalanche, and she did not need to get caught up in it herself.

Replacing her hood over her head, Daisy hurried off in a direction down the mountain different from the one Kokoro went in. Staying out of Nova Form and getting as far away from Kokoro as she could would better ensure that he would not be able to sense and follow her by the time he freed himself from the avalanche.

Chapter III

The Fourth and Rainy 1-1 **:**

For the first time in nearly eight months, Daisy stepped into the Mushroom Kingdom boundaries and entered its outskirts. Her cloak and hood stayed on to deter the rainstorm that had soaked the southern lands of Earth's northeastern quadrant. The mid-July heat and humidity contrasted heavily with the freezing blizzard of the peaks at the bottom of the world she experienced just a little more than a week ago.

Going through the streets to close in on Mushroom City and its Toad Town suburbs, Daisy noticed two things. For one, the Mushroom Kingdom world seemed somewhat gloomy and muted compared to what she remembered. That could have resulted from the downpour of precipitation and the darkened stormy sky, however. The people she saw and passed appeared as a whole untroubled and relaxed.

What she noticed aside from that inspired more surprise. It seemed that in the time she had been away, the Mushroom Kingdom – or at least the section she trekked through at that moment – had undergone a technological modernization. The area appeared more urban than she remembered, and much of its aesthetic had taken on a more futuristic theme. Metal and shine now had a prominent presence alongside the old brick, concrete, and color.

The advancement reflected everywhere, from buildings to vehicles to even the gadgets that people carried. Daisy trotted past a koopa talking into his watch. A Noki drove by her in a kart that hovered just a couple feet off of the ground with its wheels sideways and glowing blue for what appeared to be some sort of anti-gravity mechanic. When Daisy crossed the intersection, a toad almost walked his umbrella into her while doing tricks with his no-string yo-yo. Just a few moments later, a blue yoshi rode by on a hover board.

Did I miss something? Daisy wondered, glancing around as she continued deeper into Mushroom Kingdom. *Because in the time I've*

been gone, it seems like society has really evolved when it comes to all this technology stuff. I mean, this was beyond quick...

As Daisy exited the outskirts and entered some of the more inner portions of Mushroom Kingdom, the theme remained constant. In addition to various scattered construction sites and renovation areas, she saw more examples of technological advancement present and in several more forms; including but not limited to robots. Daisy did recall seeing Toad and Alden working on robots before, but the ones she saw at that moment appeared far more complex and efficient – and also varied and abundant as well, ranging in all sorts of colors from humanoid shapes to animal-type anatomies. Upon noticing a law enforcement robot that eerily resembled an average human marching past her on the cobblestone sidewalk, she caught sight of a stylized emblem on its shoulders consisting of grandiose wings and the letters "MAE."

May? Daisy wondered. *Or is it M-A-E? What's MAE?*

In a sudden move, the Patrol Bot cut in front of Daisy and effectively brought her forward progress to a halt. Confused, Daisy stared at the robot and waited for it to do something. A part of her wanted to force it out of her way, but it surprised her with the realistic human voice and octaves backing its metallic tone.

"Good afternoon, tourist earth wielder!" the Patrol Bot said. "Have you seen a rabbit in a hat lurking about these streets?"

"Um, no, I have not," muttered Daisy. "But I'll tell you what – I ain't a tourist. My house is not too far from here."

"I could do without your sass, but my apologies," the Patrol Bot replied. "I have not noticed you in the time MAE has been here. Carry on, earth wielder. I must continue to look for rabbits in hats."

Daisy raised an eyebrow as the Patrol Bot started to move away. "Wait – rabbits in hats? What do you mean by that?"

"Ah yes, we are on the lookout for Broodals in the area," the Patrol Bot happily responded. "They are registered in our database as anthropomorphic rabbits that wear hats – and may potentially hide in

them – that we have heard several grievances of in this district as of late for theft of various desserts! Data suggests that they may or may not have a relationship to the Mafio Bros criminal organization. Certainty as of yet unconfirmed. The latest reports we have received are from two days ago to the west of here."

A siren then went off from within the Patrol Bot's chest cavity. "Correction!" the robot said with urgency. "There is now a reported sighting of Broodals at a local confectionery! Don't worry, tourist! MAE Law Enforcement LDU has it under control! You take care and have a nice day!"

The Patrol Bot turned and activated a function that converted its feet into wheels. The robot then sped away with great haste down a sidewalk ahead and to Daisy's right, spraying some rain water at her out of its initial acceleration. Daisy also saw another Patrol Bot race by much further up in front of her.

"I'm not a tourist!" Daisy yelled.

The Patrol Bot had already gotten too far away to hear her. Daisy intended to go straight to her house and maybe even visit Peach at her castle, but both the development of the Mushroom Kingdom as a whole and the potential scene that could be just minutes away brewing with rabbit thieves and MAE police robots piqued her interest. Under the steady downfall of hot summer precipitation, Daisy dashed in the direction she had seen the Patrol Bots head in.

Daisy cut around the corners of the many streets and intersections for a stretch of nearly two miles to arrive at an assembly of MAE Law Enforcement LDU Patrol Bots at a joint candy shop and bakery where Bandits fired off stone rifles from the cover of overturned cars and karts. Snifits hurried out of the store doors and hurled projectiles from their masks to support their Bandit allies. The couple dozen Patrol Bots there faced heavy fire from their opposition and found themselves pinned to the sides of other nearby parked cars as they retaliated with shots from their shoulder-mounted stun guns.

"Civilian! Clear out of here!" a Patrol Bot yelled.

"I'm no civilian!" Daisy snapped, ducking behind a truck. "I know y'all can tell that I'm an earth wielder!"

"Elemental wielding is archaic, flawed, and inefficient," another Patrol Bot said. "Stand down and yield to MAE Law Enforcement LDU."

"Uh, excuse me?!" Daisy barked.

The same Patrol Bot attempted to mimic her tone in its response. "I did not hesitate, civilian. Your methods are outdated and unreliable."

"Stop calling me a civilian!" the Kruna of Earth yelled. "I'm Daisy Sarasa, damn it!"

"Daisy Sarasa," a third Patrol Bot said. "Computing..."

"What?" Daisy said.

"Ah, okay; Daisy Sarasa," the third Patrol Bot said. "Data comes back for you as a native of Sarasaland and current resident of Mushroom Kingdom. Age, twenty-three. Height, five-nine; weight, 145 pounds, athletic build with prominent muscular development. Hair, copper red; eyes, blue. An earth wielder boasting very high strength, speed, power, agility, and toughness – but at the expense of poor aerial and aquatic skill, along with a deficiency in defensive capabilities. Known occupations: Princess of Sarasaland, competitive athlete, and Kruna Yura of Earth. Last known location updated."

"Hold on – what just happened?" Daisy muttered.

"Is this data incorrect?" the third Patrol Bot asked.

"No – it's all...way too correct," Daisy mumbled. "How do you know all of that?"

"You are in the Universal Database," the third Patrol Bot replied. "I merely accessed my wireless connection to the server and opened your archive."

Daisy gasped in annoyance. "Well since when did I have an archive

in whatever that is?!"

"Alert-alert-alert!" a different Patrol Bot called out. "The Broodals have emerged!"

Two rabbits in hats had exited the store's doors behind their Bandit and Snifit henchmen; one rabbit tall and lanky and dressed in white and orange, and the other rabbit round and squat in a green and yellow suit. They had rolled out a whole cart loaded with bagged assortments of candy and baked goods, which they positioned safely behind the highest overturned car they could get to.

"Rango and Topper identified," said a Patrol Bot. "Watch out for their hats!"

"Pfft – their hats?" Daisy said. "Come on. Really?... Actually, yeah; you really can't be sure about hats from what I've seen."

"Hyuk! Yer aim is awful!" Rango, the tall Broodal called out. He jumped out from his cover and slung his hat into the crossfire. Its swift rotation and the spikes that jutted out as it flew deflected rainfall as well as shots from both parties into random directions. The rogue hat only added to the growing chaos when it spun its spikes out at the Patrol Bots, several of the robotic policemen sustaining damage from the piercing high-speed projectiles launched in semi-scattershot fashion. Once the hat finished unloading, it curved back to Rango's hands.

"Ahyuh hyuh hyuh! Stupid overgrown tin cans!" Rango shouted.

The undamaged Patrol Bots launched energized cuffs at the two Broodals and their gang. Many of the cuffs caught several Bandits and Snifits and latched onto them, at which point stunning jolts of electricity shot through their bodies and brought them to their knees. The recovering Patrol Bots then shot out sets of their cuffs as well, theirs also restraining a number of the Bandits and Snifits still standing.

"That sure changed things pretty quickly, didn't it?" Topper muttered to Rango. He was in for a rude surprise when Daisy leapt over their cover and brought both of her fists down on his head. Unfortunately

for her, her two-handed smash did not score a hit on Topper himself. Her attack clanged with his hat and knocked it off of his head, but she dealt no harm to Topper. The next thing she knew, the hat slithered along the ground and launched itself at her to knock her to the wet pavement with a heavy thud.

"Ya gotta be smarter than that, Miss Little Black Riding Hood!" taunted Topper. "Don't think we didn't come prepared!"

Daisy kipped to her feet just for Topper's hat to launch at her again and knock her back down. When she rolled to her knees, she felt a hard Stone Rifle shot blast her in her back from a nearby Bandit. Thankfully, a Patrol Bot then got a shot of its stun gun in on that same Bandit to disarm him.

"Ya best be gettin' ta steppin'! Ya hear?" Topper yelled, his hat leaping back onto his head.

Rango took off his hat and got ready to sling it out once more. "Don't try anythin' funny, or we'll put ya to yer grave early!"

The rainfall throughout Mushroom Kingdom amplified, making the Patrol Bots activate their shoulder lights and the sights on their stun guns. Daisy saw many of the red lasers trace all over the area, but her vision of the Broodals and their henchmen blurred. She could barely make out the incoming hat from Rango under the heavy downpour, but she reacted quick enough to get herself out of the way when she did. Rather than cut to the side, she jumped over the hat just as it unfurled more spikes. Though she did not intend for it, her feet landed on top of the hat. Out of the hat's recoil from her weight, she sprang at Topper and Rango. The swift shoulder bash she executed knocked Topper away, and the slide tackle she chained into took Rango's feet out from under him. Just as Rango hit the ground; Daisy grabbed him, made a somersaulting jump, and threw him out of her flip into the middle of the street.

Before Rango could get up, energy cuffs grabbed him at his ankles and bound him with a crackling blue link he struggled to overpower. A Patrol Bot had him by his collar moments later. That just left Topper and the eight Bandits and Snifits still unbound and shooting their Stone Rifles.

Daisy landed back behind the overturned cars to attack Topper; but she forgot about Rango's hat, which careened its flight back at where Rango stood prior to him getting thrown. Now in the spiked hat's path, Daisy leapt to her left and let the hat breeze by her. Instead of hitting her, the hat crashed into the cart of stolen edibles and scattered all of the bags out on the sidewalk.

"EEK! That's our goods!" Topper cried. "Oh, ya's bouta get a poundin' now!"

"From what?" Daisy carelessly muttered.

"From my Hats of Discipline!" yelled Topper. "These'll straighten ya's out!"

Maddened, Topper rushed at Daisy and pulled out several green slips from within his suit. All the slips ballooned into extra hats that dragged alongside him on the ground in a sidewalk-grinding rotation. As Topper ran at her, Daisy made several hops back and away from him and his ensemble of hats. The instant Daisy jumped at Topper to dish out a kick, his hats leapt in front of him and took the hit instead. The hats that Daisy's strike did not hit stacked themselves onto Topper's head. Despite having seven hats balancing on top of him, Topper did not let any of them fall off. They all stayed stuck together.

Daisy spun around and tried to deal a kick out of her twist, only for Topper to step out of reach and then whip his head across his body. That head-swinging motion sent his hats at her like a club and smacked her into the rear windshield of a crossover sedan. The next thing Daisy knew, all of Topper's hats flew at her before she even got herself off of the car. However, Patrol Bots intercepted all of the hats with shots from their stun guns. Much to Topper's dismay, Daisy set herself back on the sidewalk without enduring any damage from his now stunned hats. But his anger subsided to make way for worry when he noticed all of his Bandit and Snifit henchmen either downed or restrained.

Daisy sprang at Topper to land a vicious knee strike, but the rabbit sidestepped and backed away. When she turned around, she lunged at him and caught him by his foot. She then jumped, swung

him in a vertical arc, and threw him down into the street as if slinging a tomahawk. Once Topper stopped tumbling, Patrol Bots swarmed him and restrained him with energy cuffs. With him, Rango, and all the Bandits and Snifits subdued, the violence ended and the scene quieted down.

"Alright!" Daisy cheered. "That takes care of that!"

"Ya stupid heaps of metal!" groaned Topper. "I'll make sure I get ya back for this!"

"Nah – you've got some jail time ahead of ya, I'm sure," said Daisy.

"Hyuh! We'll just break out!" hollered Rango. "Y'all better watch it, 'cause once the others come get us-"

Rango and Topper both felt hard yanks when the Patrol Bots picked them up and bound their energy cuffs together. The Bandits and Snifits spread throughout the area got paired and grouped in a similar manner. The Patrol Bots also confiscated their weapons and gave them all body checks.

"Transport van is now en route," a Patrol Bot said. "Thank you for your assistance, Kruna Daisy!"

Daisy crossed her arms and turned her head away. "You better be thankful."

"Yes, we are," the robot as-a-matter-of-factly replied. "Even though we did not actually need you at all in the first place, we are still thankful. We have everything under control now, so please clear away from the crime scene."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah; whatever," Daisy muttered.

Popping a Mushroom in her mouth for recovery, Daisy started on her way home in the heavy, humid rainfall. The sore in her back from the stone shot she took earlier still remained after the Mushroom worked its magic, and all she really wanted to do was just go home and get in her own bed for once. But still, the ongoing modernization she saw throughout the kingdom and her interactions with the Patrol Bots made her both curious and uneasy about what

had gone on during her time away.

Considering how close her home was to Peach's Castle, Daisy decided she would head straight to Peach's Castle first and get updated on all that had transpired in her extended, lengthy absence.

Chapter IV

The Next Adventure?:

The rainfall over Mushroom Kingdom lightened when Daisy arrived at the bridge to Peach's Castle. Once over the bridge and under the shield of the castle itself, Daisy undid her hood and knocked on the doors. Toadette answered and lit up in an instant with excitement.

"Daisy?!" Toadette gasped. "It's been forever!"

After Daisy shook off the accumulated rain water from her cloak, Toadette led her through the halls and into one of the living rooms. From what Daisy could tell, the castle more or less looked the same. A few innovations and technological advancements aside, very little had changed.

"Chill out here," said Toadette. "I need to go get someone for you!"

Daisy nodded with a smile. "Okay."

When Toadette left, Daisy could not help but notice the dreary world she saw outside of the castle windows. The ambience out there leaked into the dim castle interior. In spite of her otherwise jubilant mood, she noticed a nagging sense of melancholy linger around and within her. She hoped that it was just a byproduct of the poor weather. For a summer day just before four in the afternoon, the world outside seemed incredibly dark.

"Look who finally made it back," Peach's voice called out.

Daisy turned and saw Peach walk out from the kitchen with a dingy cloth and a bottle of cleaning fluid. The Princess of Mushroom Kingdom's relaxed look of a dulled gold shirt over worn, stained pink pants and her hair up in a loose, sweaty bun told Daisy that she had been busy with something laborious and potentially dirty; but Daisy gave her a big hug when she approached regardless.

"I was gone a lot longer than I expected," said Daisy. "Did I interrupt

something?"

Peach went to a table nearby and set her cloth and bottle on it. "Nothing important. Just keeping this place clean is all. It'll be rainy all day, so I figured that it would be a good time to get some housework done."

"Oh, right," said Daisy. "Hey, are Mario and Luigi around anywhere?"

"No, they're away," Peach replied. "You know how busy they can be. They might actually be working with Rosalina on something right now."

Daisy's expression sobered some. "Okay...that's funny. I wonder what she would need them for."

"It's probably more of them needing her. I wouldn't look into it too much. It probably was something they were better suited for than you and the other Kruna Yura."

"Well, I guess I can't complain; especially considering how long I was gone for."

"And you were busy. Oh, just what exactly were you doing?"

"Actually, before I answer that, is Neva here?"

Just a moment after Daisy asked, Toadette walked into the room with a certain ice wielder following her. The short and pale girl in a white shirt, light blue skirt, silver shoes, and white leggings still had a streak of her snow blonde hair dyed a deep black and purple and off the side of her face. Her formerly skinny form now had some semblance of shape and curvature compared to what Daisy remembered of it when she had last seen her. When the girl saw Daisy, her face twisted and her eyes watered.

"HEY! Cave-dweller!" she screamed. "WHERE WERE YOU?! IT'S BEEN MONTHS!"

Daisy gave a somewhat annoyed smile. "Nice to see you too, Neva."

"Stupid idiot," Neva grumbled between sniffles. "Can't you keep track of time?"

"I didn't say I was gonna be back by a specific time, for one," Daisy responded. "And two, you were with me long enough to know that there wasn't any certainty over how long it would've taken. It was probably a good thing that you left when you did, because if you barely lasted three weeks with me, I don't know how you would've lasted...how long have I been gone again?"

"Like, eight months, or something," said Toadette.

Neva sighed. "I'm sorry that I came with you only to leave so soon."

"That's fine," Daisy said. "I totally understood. You had someone really special you wanted to come back to. Speaking of which, where is he?"

"He's not here," Neva muttered.

"Oh, well that's a bummer," said Daisy. "Is he at college or a gym or something right now?"

"No, I mean he's not here at all," said Neva. "He never came back..."

In an instant, Daisy's cheeriness faded. "Oh... How come?"

"I don't know," said Neva. "I came back here thinking I would be here for when he came, but he never did. Ramona didn't either. In fact, I haven't been able to contact either one of them."

"None of us have," said Peach. "Neva told us that the last time she had talked to Andrew was right before she left with you."

"I wanted him to be with me for Christmas..." Neva said, a slight pout showing. "But that just never happened. I've been waiting here, and I kept trying to call and reach out to them. But...nothing. I feel like an ass for ditching you, Daisy. I just missed him so much. I needed to see him and have him around. I couldn't take not being with him any longer. But now, it's like he somehow just doesn't exist anymore. I'm just...I'm a wreck. And life here hasn't been any better."

"Oh, come on!" said Daisy. "The Mushroom Kingdom's a great place! You can do a lot of stuff here! And what about school? I bet you're excited about finally getting a diploma, huh?"

"Toadsworth and I have recently been homeschooling her," said Peach. "She had a bad run at Toad Town High School where she struggled with the classes there and was surrounded by classmates who shunned her and kept calling her stupid for being a now nineteen-year-old freshman. She had no friends and got in plenty of fights."

"They were a bunch of ass-hats," grumbled Neva. "They were always trying to start something. I got hit with anything they could come up with. 'Mental munchkin.' 'Ugly witch.' 'Straitjacket retard.' Just, all kinds of crap. I had to beat some of their faces in, but then the stupid school staff wanted to try and pin everything on me because I was older than just about every other kid there."

"So we took her in and decided to teach her ourselves," said Peach. "We figured she would be better, do better, and feel better in a safe space here. However, she has been performing terribly."

"I'm trying, damn it!" Neva snapped. "But you know what? I'm just trash. Garbage. I'm nineteen and can't even get past ninth grade. I'll never amount to anything in life. No one even likes me. All I can do is just sit in my room here and sing to myself. I'm too scared to go anywhere. Part of me thinks Andrew left me and is purposefully avoiding me. That has to be why he hasn't come back like he said he would – like he *promised* he would. He doesn't really want to come back to me-"

"No, Neva, it's not like that at all," said Daisy. "Something must've happened to him and Ramona both. And you're not garbage. You're our friend. A valued, important friend. And what happened to Marut? Why don't you ever go hang out with him? He's a fun and cool dude."

"He's not here either," said Neva. "He's almost never around. He's with Wario at Wario Ware Inc. now."

"What about the others?" Daisy asked. "Maybe if you called up

Athelstan, you two could go to a Milk Bar and hang out for a while."

"Look, Sarasa!" Neva barked. "Andrew's gone, Ramona's gone, Marut's gone, Warra's gone, and Bowser and Athelstan are both busy! I'm just by myself here."

"To be fair, I've given you plenty of opportunities to do stuff with Toadette and I," said Peach.

"What's the point," mumbled Neva. "Just, why even bother."

Daisy sighed. "So I'm gonna assume Athelstan's busy with his archiving work, Bowser's busy with my dad in Sarasaland, and Warra's just been off the radar like Ramona and Andrew?"

"Pretty much," said Neva. "And you taking so long to come back didn't help."

"Again, I didn't know how long I was gonna take," said Daisy. "And I got sidetracked way too many times, particularly because Kokoro kept attacking me."

"That creep followed you?" asked Neva.

"More like *stalked,* " said Daisy. "I had to stay on the move and focus more on fighting him than on getting to where I needed to go, and I didn't want to lure him to where the city at the far south was before I got the Vranzer. Of course, he still ambushed me there, but at least I got this first-"

Daisy pulled out from her Hammerspace Belt the Alkemei Vranzer, Pendant of Fate. Its colorless, inactive gem and unique metal binding appeared distinct from Daisy's Orianthi and Neva's Hien. Neva cracked a small smile when she saw that Daisy had attained what she had set out to find, though her mood still carried a sizable level of gloomy negativity.

"So that's what you've been doing ever since you left?" said Peach. "Neva did mention you were looking for one of those, but it really took you that long?"

Daisy nodded, her expression equally as cocky as it was grim. "Like

I said – I got sidetracked too often."

"So what's it do?" Neva asked.

"Don't know," said Daisy. "I tried activating it a few times on my way back here, but nothing ever happened. It might be an automatic thing or something, like how Ramona's Motomeru and Bowser's Kracielle work. And your Hien too, I guess."

"Partially," said Neva. "Well, now what are you gonna do with it?"

"I'm gonna have to figure out how it works before I try and use it to neutralize the Ankh," said Daisy. "I mean, unless you wanna risk unsealing Osiris just so we can reseal him somewhere else, but I don't think we want to relive what happened when he was freed in the future, now do we?"

"No way – that was totally freaky, and I almost died," said Neva. "But it's not like we can undo any Elemental Seal even if we wanted to because the team's fractured and dead."

"Okay, you might be overreacting," said Daisy. "Yeah, it has been a while since we were all together, but the team's not dead."

Neva groaned, her mood deteriorating. Though she did not say anything, she did not have to for Daisy to understand what she felt.

"It's okay that you miss everybody," said Daisy. "And I'd expect you to miss Andrew a lot. Having a bad time without him has only made you miss him more, I'm sure."

"Yeah," Neva mumbled, wiping at her eyes. "Just... I mean, it's not like I was, like, gonna marry the shadow-spitter or anything dumb like that. He's just some guy. I can get over him, I bet... It doesn't matter that he was the only guy that ever actually liked me, or that I always felt better around him, or how special he made me feel, or that he promised he would come back. You know what – this just proves that everyone is unreliable, and I had it right the first time-"

"Where are you going?" Daisy asked Neva, who had started walking away.

"I'm getting my crap together and leaving," said Neva.

"To go where?" asked Peach.

"Somewhere – I don't know!" Neva shouted.

Daisy leapt over the couch and snatched Neva by her arms before she got far. "You're not just going to pack up and leave!"

"Why not?!" Neva yelled in Daisy's face.

"Because I won't let you!" Daisy yelled right back.

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"I sure as hell can!"

Neva tried in vain to break from Daisy's grasp. "Get your dirt-digger claws off of me!"

"Only if you say you're not leaving!" Daisy shouted.

"Oh dear, I did not intend to bear witness to any roughhousing today," murmured Peach.

Neva tried to slide her foot under one of Daisy's to trip her up, but she instead ended up losing her own footing. Only Daisy's hold on her kept her from hitting the floor. However, that also meant that Daisy now had complete control over Neva's dangling body. Still squirming to try and get free, Neva let herself start bawling and crying.

"Let me go!" Neva yelled. "Get off of me!"

Daisy did not do either one. Instead, she let Neva's feet touch the ground and pulled her in for a long, tight hug. Eventually, Neva stopped trying to get away and just cried herself out into Daisy's chest. Peach and Toadette inched towards them in silence, and Daisy let Neva release every ounce of pent up emotion that she had in her. Several minutes passed before Neva's outburst started subsiding, and several more moments went by before she calmed down altogether.

"I just want two things," Neva murmured. "I want Andrew back, and I want for life to not suck. That's all I want. And I can't have either one."

"I tell ya what, Neva," said Daisy. "How about tomorrow, we go on a little adventure?"

Neva raised an eyebrow. "Where to?"

"To Christmas Village," said Daisy. "That's where Ramona and Andrew live, right?"

"He might not even be there."

"We won't know unless we go. And if we don't find Andrew, we could find Ramona. And with as close as those two are, she'd have to know where he went, right?"

"But I haven't been able to contact her any more than I have him."

"Well, there's literally nothing else we can do. Do you want to just give up on him? Because it seems to me like you already are even though you really don't want to."

"I don't know why I haven't given up on everything yet. My whole life has been horrid."

"Before you joined us, you mean."

Neva said nothing, but she broke the hug. After a couple of steps away, she let her gaze drift to the polished floor at her feet.

"Neva, I'm giving you an out here," said Daisy. "You can either sit here and sulk and be depressed, or you can shake out of this funk of yours and come with me to Christmas Village. Whether you're coming or not, I'm going. They're my friends too."

"I think you should go with her," Peach said to Neva. "This depression of yours will get no better just staying here and hiding in a self-fulfilling cycle."

Neva made a low grumble in her throat but otherwise stayed quiet

for a few moments before speaking up again. "How are we getting there?"

Daisy cupped a hand on her face and gazed up at the ceiling. "How *are* we getting there?"

They had to think about that one. When Daisy and Neva had initially left to go find the Vranzer, they had taken a motorbike and a kart respectively. At some point after Neva had made the decision to return to the Mushroom Kingdom, Daisy's bike had gotten destroyed. That meant that Daisy had to rely on her own feet and on Warp Pipes for travel, which only lengthened the amount of time she had spent away. They could do something similar again, although they would have to deal with crossing the Arlan Ocean to get to the eastern side of the world.

"Daisy, how did you get to Sarasaland that one time last fall?" asked Peach.

"It was on foot, for the most part," said Daisy. "I took some Warp Pipe to the west of here to get across the Pyrimies. I figured it would've been much faster to go that way since Sarasaland is on that side of the east."

"I thought you just said that you went west," muttered Neva.

"I did," said Daisy. "But I'm saying that on the eastern side of the world, Sarasaland is far east."

"And so Sarasaland is closer if you travel west and cross over the Pyrimies Ocean," said Peach.

"But you need to get to the western side of the east," said Toadette. "That's where Christmas Village is."

Neva clutched her head and groaned. "Somebody *please* start making sense! Look – just, how are we getting to Christmas Village?"

"We had the Koopa Cruiser in the future to get us around the world," said Daisy. "But that was in the future. Not now."

"I thought Bowser still had the old Koopa Cruiser somewhere," said Peach.

"Nah, he took that with him to Sarasaland, I think," said Toadette.

"He wouldn't mind if we borrowed something from his palace, I bet," said Daisy.

"Well hold on," said Peach. "Just because he's a friend doesn't mean you can just go digging through his things."

Daisy rolled her eyes and stifled a laugh. "I'd like to think that we're cool enough by now for him to not bat an eye, especially since this involves two other friends potentially missing. And besides – Toad is already over there at the palace often enough with Alden working on all sorts of mechanical and techy stuff, right?"

"He is, actually," said Toadette. "And he's over there right now too."

"At least try to call Bowser first," said Peach. "If nothing else comes from it, you can let him know that something's wrong with Ramona and Andrew."

Daisy, Neva, and Toadette arrived at Bowser's Palace later on at the tail end of the stormy afternoon. Upon stepping out from under the retractable roof of the large Royale kart Toadette drove them over in, the group of three hurried under the cover of the porch roof in front of the doors to minimize their exposure to the still steady downfall. A koopa answered the door and let them in.

The grand, regal building was quiet and tranquil; and an odd phenomenon of early evening sun shining through the rainfall gave the interior a golden hue through the windows. Without Bowser there, many of the koopas that also spent their days in the palace were absent. Though Toad, Alden, and a handful of koopas kept silence from pervading the palace, the place seemed barren and lonely.

The koopa that had let Daisy, Neva, and Toadette in directed them to the palace's workshop, where Toad and Alden were hard at work

on some sort of mechanical abomination. As soon as they noticed the group enter the room, Toad and Alden dropped everything and happily went over to greet them. For as utterly fatigued as Daisy was on an otherwise humdrum day, she still had an upbeat cheeriness about her.

"Man, I haven't had to deal with you two in a while!" Daisy said to the blacksmith-engineers. "You guys busy?"

Toad shook his head with a grumble but smiled. "Of course not! You totally did not just see Alden and I hammering away at that robot over there. Nope. We were just sitting on our butts playing video games all day."

"Well, that explains the random pile of junk you were trying to sort through," said Neva.

"I was being sarcastic!" Toad snapped. "Of course we're busy!"

"And that's *not* a pile of junk," Alden said. The gold-shelled koopa gestured to the semi-humanoid metallic build standing by a large table on the left side of the spacious workshop. "That's another prototype we're working on."

"Prototype of what?" asked Neva.

"I guess you would've known if you got out more," said Toad.

Neva started laughing, her light-toned head filling up with deep red hues at a rapid pace. " 'Shroom-head, you must be in rare form today to be *this* mouthy!"

"Hey, we're both pretty frustrated with working on this robot build here," said Alden.

"That's a prototype robot?" asked Daisy.

"Yea-ha!" said Toad. "It's like robots and all this other hi-tech stuff are all the rage right now! Everybody just wants to fast forward into the future!"

"So in addition to elemental tools, we're getting super hi-tech too,"

said Alden.

"Gotta stick with the times, ya know?" said Toad.

"Stick with the times?" said Daisy. "I've been gone eight months, and there's already robot cops and hovering karts?"

"And holograms," said Alden. "And drones. Oh, and some cars are self-driving now too."

"And Wi-Fi is free and universal now," said Toad. "And TVs can surf the internet too."

"And there's a ton of other cool new stuff," said Alden. "But you get the point."

"Wait – are you telling me you guys did all of that?!" exclaimed Daisy.

"What? Us? No way," said Toad. "I don't know who did, but they did a pretty fantastic job."

"All we know is that all this futuristic tech started showing up in town a couple months ago," said Alden.

"Apparently, Peach doesn't know what the source of any of it is either," said Toadette. "All this advanced modernization stuff just kinda came out of nowhere. Somebody brought it over, and some deal must have been made somewhere with some company or organization or what have you; and then the next thing we knew, this stuff all just started cropping up everywhere."

"What's MAE?" Daisy asked.

"May?" said Toad. "That's a month."

"Wha- no," said Daisy. "A lot of those robots and all that other new technology had some special angel-winged symbol with the letters "M-A-E" bolded in the center. What is that?"

"Oh, I dunno," said Toad. "Some emblem or logo or something. Looks a little weird to have a mystical-looking emblem on all this

advanced tech."

"So you don't know what it stands for?" asked Daisy.

"I've tried to look it up," said Alden. "All I can ever find is a bunch of websites selling MAE products, but there's nothing saying what MAE stands for."

"And those aren't those 'fake news' websites advertising bootlegs or ripoffs," said Toad. "They've got the same models and emblems and designs that we see on a regular basis now."

Daisy took a deep breath and wiped at her forehead. "Okay. It's gonna take me a little while to get used to this technology expansion."

"Oh, who cares," grumbled Neva. "Just a bunch of mechanical junk. It's not like they can make actual people you can talk to and be friends with and hug and cuddle and adore and feel happy around."

"Um...okay...?" Toad said. "Why do you sound like you just broke up with somebody?"

The next instant, Toad felt a fist go across his face and throw him into a stumble that nearly ended with him on the ground. Her head bowed down, the shaking, trembling Kruna Yura of Ice restrained her emotion just enough to prevent herself from initiating another attack. Just as Toad got ready to retaliate, Toadette stepped in front of Neva and grabbed him.

"No, Toad – that's what I brought them over for," said Toadette. "Something's wrong with Andrew and Ramona both, and they need to go see what's going on."

"I gave Bowser a call and he said that there's a spare airship around here," added Daisy. "We want to head out early tomorrow morning. We just need keys and pilots, right?"

"Why don't you just take the Toad Express?" asked Toad.

Daisy sucked her teeth and frowned. "Man, I don't wanna be stuck in some *pink* plane! What do ya think I am? A girl?"

"Yes," said Alden.

"Well I'm not a girly girl, so don't get that all twisted up," said Daisy.

"Okay, well, you don't need a big huge airship just to carry you two," said Toad. "If you don't want to take the private jet because it's pink, then I don't know what to tell ya about you being picky."

"Hey, pink is Peach's thing," said Daisy. "I'm not messing with pink. Not only am I not a fan of pink, but I don't need to be confused for her any more than I weirdly somehow have been in the past."

"Then take one of those Clown Cars," said Toad.

"We are not about to go riding in some clown head!" yelled Neva.

"You still haven't apologized for hitting me," said Toad.

"Sorry," Neva spat out. "There. Happy?"

"Maybe you should ask a Clown Car," Toad replied.

"I'll just ask you again after I slug you again!" snapped Neva.

Toadette reestablished herself in between Neva and Toad, her arms coming up to keep the two spaced away from each other. "Okay! There is a lot of unnecessary bitterness here!"

"We didn't break up, fungus-hat!" Neva barked at Toad.

Toad sighed. "Tell me again why I wanna help this whiny little girl go find her boyfriend? I'd say she oughta be more concerned with passing ninth grade first."

"I'll pass my foot through your gut!" Neva screamed.

Daisy latched onto Neva and held her in place before she could lunge at Toad. "Okay, stop! Both of you! This is not cool! We got a bigger problem than you two being dumb! So just stop it and apologize right now before I gotta crown both of you!"

"Alright, alright!" Toad said. "Sorry. Okay?! Geez. Chill out. So

touchy."

Neva grumbled but did not try to break away from Daisy's hold. "I already said I'm sorry."

"Then act like you mean it," Daisy said, letting the ice wielder go. "Now, back on the subject of transport to Christmas Village."

"Ooh! I know what you can take!" said Alden. "Yeah! Take the Bullet Blitzer! It's compact and speedy! And it's definitely not pink!"

"That sounds more than doable for me," said Daisy.

"We still gotta get somebody to fly it," said Neva.

"It can't be that hard to fly that thing," said Daisy.

"Aircraft and land vehicles are two completely different things," replied Toad. "Trust me when I say that. They are not in any way synonymous. Doesn't matter if it's a helicopter or a plane or an airship."

Toadette shrugged. "Hey, I can fly you two over. I'm not half bad at flying, and I sure wouldn't mind getting out on a trip. I've got nothing important coming up that I can't clear with Peach for rescheduling."

"Alright, then it sounds like we're set to go," Daisy declared.

"Alden, go get the keys for the Bullet Blitzer," Toad said. When Alden nodded and went to one corner of the workshop, Toad then addressed Daisy, Neva, and Toadette. "You're trying to leave tomorrow, right? Just go straight to the garage when you're ready. We'll tell the other guys around here what's going on so that they don't sound off an alarm and think you're stealing anything."

The rain had let up to a light mist by the time Daisy had returned to her humble residence on the west side of Toad Town. That night marked the first time she had set foot inside of it in nearly eight months. Though she did not have much in the house, everything appeared untouched in the time that she was gone. And, pending a

trip tomorrow, she would have just a single-night stay in her own bed.

A small, compact house without the mushroom-style embellishments and design that most other buildings in Mushroom Kingdom possessed, it did not feature much in the way of decoration. Aside from some flowery aesthetics, some soccer, baseball, and tennis equipment in one corner, and some simplistic but colorful furniture, it was as plain a one-person house as any other of the same kind. The house's build consisted of a kitchen-living room with three windows, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a basement. Money from various athletic accomplishments have kept the residence under her name.

Daisy took off her rainproof cloak and let it hang over a chair in the kitchen before collapsing onto the couch just seconds later. The dark house seemed empty and foreign after the crusade she had in searching for and acquiring the Vranzer. Actually, ever since she had started her adventure at the elemental shrines, she had almost never gotten the chance to so much as even step foot in her house. Now that things had slowed down – for the moment, at least – she could feel the fatigue coming on and threatening to knock her out for the night right there on the couch.

But in thinking of the Vranzer, Daisy's drowsiness subsided. Because of the night vision her earth wielding affinity granted her, she was in no rush to turn on any of the lights. However, she did show haste in digging through her Hammerspace Belt to pull out the Alkemei Vranzer, Pendant of Fate.

Do I take this with me? Daisy wondered. She had her Orianthi on, the Pendant of Reanimation that she had brought back from the future. Despite being uncomfortable and disturbed with it from the moment Arka Knight gave it to her, she did not mind it at all now. In fact, she had grown accustomed to it and the questionable abilities it possessed. On the other hand, she still had yet to so much as even successfully activate the Vranzer – let alone figure out what it could do.

It only made sense to keep her Orianthi equipped. However, that did not mean that she could not still take the Vranzer with her anyways. A mental picture formed in her mind of someone breaking into the

house and stealing the Vranzer, which could not happen if she took it with her to Christmas Village.

I have to take it with me , Daisy then thought. *Even though I probably won't end up using it while I'm there, I have to maintain immediate control over it. It has to stay on my person at all times. I can't risk leaving it alone and unattended anywhere.*

After eyeballing it for a little while longer, Daisy placed the Vranzer back into her Hammerspace Belt. Drowsiness then returned to her, and she could tell that she was in for a considerably lengthy and much-needed slumber. Before she did pass out, she thought about all the other Kruna Yura. Ramona, Andrew, Bowser, Athelstan, Marut...Warra...

Chapter V

Dimmed Light:

The next day, a roughly five-hour flight starting in the late morning put Daisy, Neva, and Toadette into the far north city of Christmas Village. Toadette parked the Bullet Blitzer, a speedy Bullet Bill-shaped battle-type helicopter, in a field close to where they had Ramona's and Andrew's addresses marked on the aircraft's GPS. In spite of the summer season, they noticed a chill in the air upon stepping out of the Bullet Blitzer; and unlike in the Mushroom Kingdom, there did not appear to be a mass abundance of technological advancement present.

"Alright, so we'll go to Andrew's house first and see what's up over there, right?" asked Daisy.

Neva flinched upon hearing the question. "Actually, w-why don't we go to Ramona's house first?"

"Why don't you want to go check Andrew's place first?" asked Toadette.

"Um, because, 'cause..." Neva stuttered out. "Let's just...can we just go to Ramona's and then Andrew's afterward?"

"What – come on, man," said Daisy. "We came all the way here, and now you sound like you're scared to knock on his door."

"Well, what if nothing was wrong all along?" asked Neva. "And Andrew just didn't want to see me anymore? If I go there and he just turns me away altogether, I just...I don't know what I'm gonna do if that happens..."

"No, he wouldn't do something like that," said Daisy. "He loves you. A lot. Trust me when I say that. There's no mistaking it. But if you feel more comfortable going to Ramona's house first, we'll do that."

"There's still a good chance neither of them are actually home," said

Toadette.

"Yeah, but we would have had nowhere else to know to look other than here," said Daisy. "So we'll see where we're at after we check their houses and either find out what's what or find out if they're still even here at all."

Trekking through the suburban-dominant town, the group of three arrived at a two-level house of moderate size with an SUV in the driveway. This was supposedly where Ramona lived, and Andrew's residence existed within just a few blocks away. When Daisy, Neva, and Toadette stepped onto the porch and knocked on the front door, a lean and youthful-looking older man in casual attire came and answered.

"How's it going there?" the jolly man said.

"We're friends of Ramona," said Daisy. "I'm Daisy. That's Toadette. This is Neva."

The man lit up with surprise, and his happy tone halved. "Oh, cool. You can just call me 'Leo.' "

"You're her dad, right?" asked Neva. "Is Ramona here?"

"Yup, I'm her dad alright," Leo replied. "And yes, she's here. Did ya come to see her?"

"Yeah," said Daisy. "Can we?"

"Oh, sure," said Leo, stepping aside. "Come on in. This is quite the surprise, I'll say. Ramie hasn't had company in a long time. Just go walk up to her door and give her a knock. First one at the top of the stairs. I doubt she'll want to come down unless she really has to, and I'm not about to try and argue with her again."

Daisy, Neva, and Toadette climbed the stairs across from the front door to reach the start of a darkened hallway on the second floor. As Leo had said, the three approached the door closest to them. Daisy gave a knock and waited for an answer. No one opened the door,

but the sound of Ramona's voice came through.

"Yeah, what is it, Dad?" Ramona asked.

"It's not your dad," said Neva.

No response came.

"It's us!" said Daisy. "Your friends! Daisy and Neva! And Toadette too!"

"Hi, Ramie!" Toadette called out with a giggle.

No response.

"We all wanted to come see you!" said Daisy. "You haven't been keeping in touch, and you've made us all real worried! What's been going on?"

"Look – open the damn door," grumbled Neva.

"She didn't let us in yet," said Toadette. "We can't just barge in-"

"Too late," Daisy mumbled as Neva turned the knob and pushed the door in.

What Daisy, Neva, and Toadette expected to see was a bright, neat, and pristine room. Instead, they saw a messy, disorganized living space with the curtains drawn and blocking most of the waning outside sunshine. The twenty-year-old girl hunched over on a chair and leaning on the desk where her active computer monitor stood more or less reflected the disheveled state of the room. Her dingy white tank top and pilled black leggings seemed as tired as her expression and unkempt gold-blonde hair. The forlorn and melancholy demeanor dominating her did not lessen when she saw who had entered her room. If anything, their presence may have made her mood deteriorate.

"Uh...hi!" Daisy said. "We missed you!"

"Why are you here?" Ramona grumbled.

"What do you mean?" Neva snapped, marching into the room. "Why didn't you ever answer when I called? Why didn't you or Andrew ever answer? Why are you both ignoring us?!"

Ramona's expression strained and turned sour. Once again, she gave no response.

"You were supposed to come back to Mushroom Kingdom months ago!" Neva shouted. "You guys were gonna get your college junk together and come live in the Mushroom Kingdom like you said you would, and Peach had rooms ready for you both, but you never came or even so much as tried to keep in touch! We thought something bad happened! But you've been sitting here the whole time?! You both just bailed on us?! And why?!"

"Because something bad did happen," said Ramona.

"What did?! Huh?!" Neva yelled. "You better start speaking up, because this is not cool! The both of you just left me hanging! Especially Andrew! That total jackass promised me he would be back, and he never came back! And to not hear anything about what's going on from either of you?! What the hell is wrong with you two-"

"Andrew's gone," Ramona said.

Neva's mounting anger faded in a hurry. "What?"

"He's gone," said Ramona. "I don't know what happened to him."

"You mean he just vanished?" Daisy asked.

"As far as I know," Ramona replied, standing up from her chair. She gestured for Daisy and Toadette to come in, and she closed the door behind them.

"We came here first, so we didn't know if he was still here or not," said Daisy.

"Maybe he got kidnapped?" Toadette suggested.

"He hasn't been here for a while," said Ramona. "I don't know what I

can tell you. We were getting close to ready to transfer and move over to Mushroom Kingdom. We were going to call and say that we were all clear here and would be on our way once we had gotten everything finalized. He was here hanging out with me one night, he stayed over later than intended, my dad and I both saw him off when he left...and that was it. He just disappeared without any warning. And I haven't heard or seen from him since then. And it's been months since then, so...that's what happened."

Neva scowled. "So he's just gone?! How could you just let him vanish like that?! Aren't you supposed to be looking over him?! I thought you were supposed to be psycho-overprotective, but you let this happen?! And you never got him back?!"

"JUST SHUT UP!" Ramona roared. "I ALREADY KNOW! YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME THAT!"

The sudden, unexpected outburst frightened Daisy, Neva, and Toadette. The only time Ramona had lashed out in such a way was in the future at Mekarsari Island when she thought Andrew had been captured or killed and that she had failed to protect him. No one dared say anything extra to the normally serene and gentle Kruna Yura of Light who now had much the same manic state that had overtaken her at Mekarsari.

"I know I screwed up!" Ramona yelled. "He's gone, and I couldn't do anything! I failed so badly! I'm a failure of a friend!"

"Hold on, Ramona – it's not your fault," Daisy said.

"YES IT IS!" Ramona screamed. "No one else could've kept him safe but me, and I didn't! It's all my fault!"

"Okay, come on – what could you really have done to stop it from happening?" said Daisy. "You didn't know beforehand that he would disappear on that particular night at that specific time. The only thing you can fault yourself for is not letting us know that he had gone missing."

"I thought for a while that maybe he would come back, but he never did," Ramona said, rubbing at her eyes and sniffling. "I didn't know

what to do. I didn't want you guys to find out and get upset about it."

Neva sighed, her expression tearing up as well. "I'm more upset that he's gone than I am anything else."

Daisy walked up close to Ramona and grabbed her wrists. "What's all this?"

Ramona froze in place. All along her arms, shoulders, and even parts of her chest near her neck; countless long, raised, dash-like scars and scabs littered her skin. The nature of them seemed eerily similar to the ones Andrew had scattered across most of his body, which led Daisy to a startling conclusion.

"Why'd you do this to yourself?" Daisy asked Ramona.

Upon realizing that Daisy could tell that the scars were all self-inflicted, Ramona's eyes began overflowing. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" asked Daisy. "Come on. Tell me. I'm your friend. I'm not going to judge you."

Ramona sniveled for a little while before she responded. "I started doing it shortly after he had disappeared. I don't know why I did. I just felt so depressed and guilty over him being gone. It was like I lost a brother. Like, a brother just fell out of existence, out of nowhere, without any warning. And...and it hurt too much. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know what to feel, I didn't know what to think – I just remembered that that was something he would do, and doing it reminded me of him..."

Daisy did not need to hear any more. She clutched Ramona and pulled her in for a heartfelt hug that made the light wielder burst out crying. Neva winced, recognizing that she was in Ramona's current position just a day earlier. Seeing it from the outside looking in resonated within her.

"Don't hurt yourself anymore, please," Daisy murmured. "Don't blame yourself for any of this. It's not your fault. Please, don't take it out on yourself. Everything will be okay. We'll get this all fixed. We'll get him back. Please, don't attack yourself. It'll be alright..."

"I can't even live life right anymore," Ramona mumbled. "Everything just feels so wrong."

"What have you been doing here?" asked Toadette.

"I didn't finish the withdrawal from Village North College," said Ramona. "So I stayed there and have been going to class there like I was before joining you guys."

"Hey, you're staying productive!" said Toadette.

"My grades are sucky compared to what they were before," muttered Ramona. "I've just been staying here in my room when I'm not in class. I haven't been motivated to do anything else. I don't feel like I can even do anything now."

"No, you don't have to sit here and feel helpless," said Daisy, patting Ramona's back. "Andrew wouldn't want you to do that. You gotta be strong and have some composure. Whatever happened is not your fault at all. Now, we just have to focus on making things right. You clean yourself up, and we'll try and come up with a way to track that best friend of yours down, alright?"

Ramona took a long while to respond; but eventually, she replied, "Okay."

Daisy gave Ramona another hearty pat before letting her go. She, Neva, and Toadette then left the room to give Ramona a chance to get herself together. The three of them waited in the living room on the main floor, where Leo sat with the TV on some hunting show.

"She's been really depressed ever since Andrew disappeared," said Leo. "I can't blame her. I really liked that boy. I remember he rode his bike over here the day we first moved here thirteen years ago, and he and my daughter hit it off right away – and that was after Ramona was complaining about hating this town and not wanting to live here."

Daisy laughed a little. "For real?"

"Oh yeah!" Leo replied. "It was maybe about an hour after me and a couple of my friends got the moving truck here. I'm trying to get

Ramona to cheer up and not be so miserable about the whole move and about her mother being distrustful, and then I turn around for two seconds and she's riding that boy's bike up and down the sidewalk as soon as I look back! They've truly been inseparable ever since that day. Well, I mean, until he vanished that one night."

"Oh, we're gonna get him back," said Daisy. "Wherever he's gone, we're gonna get him."

"It would mean a helluva lot to her," said Leo. "I don't think anyone in the world is as close as they are. I wish his father wasn't such a butthead and cared about him like he ought to. He's a real great kid. Fairly hot-headed and mood-swingy, but he's an otherwise awesome boy. But man, his dad has put in minimal effort to try and find him. All he did was file a report. And then, he went and sold their house just last month and moved away! So who knows where *he* is now either! Really, I don't know how you can expect to find Andrew if you have no leads as to where he could be."

"I don't know," said Daisy. "But we have to at least try. Ramona *might* have something that could help."

Ramona marched down the steps several minutes later. Instead of the tattered old outfit she had on before, she now wore a pure white short-sleeve shirt over a black long-sleeve shirt, a pair of gold pants, and a pair of thick black boots. Her choppy, layered hair now had a cleaner, straightened appearance on all sides, even if still with a messy texture to it. But overall, she looked far more lively than she did earlier.

"Okay, how are we going to do this?" Ramona asked. Even her tone seemed more firm and stable.

"Actually, I was thinking we could use your Motomeru in some way," said Daisy.

The Alkemei Motomeru, Pendant of Detection, was Ramona's special Pendant of Power. Unlike Daisy and Neva, who both had their Orianthi and Hien on respectively, Ramona did not have her Motomeru equipped. Ramona perked up a little when Daisy mentioned the powerful gem and stopped her forward progress at

the second to last step.

"How can we use that?" Ramona asked. "It was just something we used to find the Crystal Tears in the future, remember?"

"Yeah, but it was programmed to do that, wasn't it?" Daisy said. "How come you never programmed it to look for specific people?"

"I never knew how to do it," said Ramona. "The Black Mages were the ones that programmed it. Before they set it to look for Crystal Tears, it could only detect other Alkemei."

"Then it sounds like we'll have to look for the Black Mages," said Daisy.

"How can we even be sure if it can detect people?" asked Neva.

"Well, it could detect the Crystal Tears," said Daisy. "And the Crystal Tears altogether paired with the Motomeru led us directly to Peach. And the Crystal Tears all had Peach's DNA in them. So, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that the Motomeru can detect somebody else if it's programmed right, would it?"

"Hey, that's not bad thinking!" Ramona exclaimed, rushing up the stairs. Moments later, she trotted back down with the Motomeru now attached to her neck.

"Since I'm piloting, where do we have to go to look for whoever these Black Mages are?" asked Toadette.

Daisy shrugged. "That's about as far as my idea goes. I can only think that they would be back at Marissa's Mansion in Sarasaland. Obviously, Marissa wouldn't be there, but *they* could still possibly be there."

"If we're all ready to go, then let's head there now," said Ramona. "I've just got to call my college and say that I'll be on leave. Again."

"Going there now's a decent idea, actually," said Toadette. "It's, like, close to sunset here, so if we go to Sarasaland now, it'll probably be real late. But we could stay overnight at Castle Town with Bowser, couldn't we?"

"I bet we could," said Daisy. "And it'd be nice to see how the big guy's doing, too!"

"Off on another trip, huh?" Leo said to Ramona. "I sure hope it's not anywhere near as insane as what you had told me about regarding the last one."

"Me too," said Ramona. "But it shouldn't be; so long as we get to find the Black Mages quickly, that is."

"Please do stay out of trouble if things get too dangerous wherever you end up," said Leo. "I know you're old enough to do your own thing now, but, you're still my precious child."

"I'll do my best to stay safe, Dad," Ramona replied.

"And you guys better not drag my daughter into anything totally ridiculous!" Leo said to Daisy, Neva, and Toadette. "If something bad happens to her, you'll have to answer to me!"

"Don't worry about a thing, Leo!" declared Daisy. "There's nothing we can't handle!"

Chapter VI

The Sovereign Organization:

It was past midnight when the Bullet Blitzer touched down in the northeastern portion of Sarasa Field. Daisy, Ramona, Neva, and Toadette ventured into the darkness of the mystical Deep Wood just on the border of the Chai Kingdom boundary. Both Daisy and Neva had good firsthand memory of the area; Daisy from her escape following the Betedaimon transformation Marissa Arkana had forced on her, and Neva from the time she and Warra snuck through the witch's mansion lair.

Unlike when they had revisited the area in the future world, the entire mansion still stood. However, a thorough search throughout all of its floors and ghastly underlevels revealed that, much like in the future, there was no one there. Toadette and the three Kruna Yura had come all this way only to arrive at an abandoned mansion with no sign of the Black Mages anywhere. They regrouped back in the grassy field making up the mansion's back yard, disappointed to find that their one key to Andrew's whereabouts fell through.

Daisy made a deep exhale. "Alright. No Black Mages here at all. And we have no leads as to where they could be, much like we have no idea where Andrew could be."

"So...we might not ever see him again..." Toadette mumbled.

The thought sent Ramona into a near-comatose state. Likewise, Neva began trembling and breathing at an exaggerated pace. Their altered moods only increased the need and urge within Daisy to find the lost Kruna Yura of Shadow.

"Well hold on a minute," Daisy said. "We can't just throw in the towel because plan-A didn't work. We just have to come up with something else. We can do that, right? We're smart!"

"I didn't pass high school!" Neva cried out.

"We don't need any sort of recognition from an institutional system to know that we're smart!" Daisy quickly added. "Anyways, we can definitely think of something. Ramona, do you remember more of what happened that night?"

"Not any more than I had already told you," Ramona replied. "All I can really say of it was that he stayed over late; but he has stayed later before. And he only has to go down a couple blocks to get home, so it's still throwing me off how something could've happened when he wasn't even outside for long. And I don't remember what exactly we were doing before then, but it was on a Friday."

Neva sighed. "That gives us nothing."

"Um, I thought of something, but it's probably not the best of scenarios," said Toadette. "He was a pretty troubled guy, wasn't he?"

"I would have to say he was," Daisy replied.

"Yes, he was," Ramona confirmed. "His dad wasn't the best person, and you could make the argument quite easily that his mum did not even want to have him; and then you can go ahead and make whatever inferences you want based off of that and how soon she left after he was born. And then there is a bit of a myriad of other stuff as well."

Toadette's expression turned somber. "Then, you don't think that maybe he just decided that...um...well, that he had...just had enough?"

Neva raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"That he just had enough with the world and decided to be done with it," said Toadette. "I mean, I'm no expert, but... I don't know how to put this – is it possible that he just decided not to be a part of the living world anymore?"

"If you wanna just say that he killed himself, you can do that," muttered Neva. "What do you think we are? Oversensitive?"

Toadette paused for a moment to decide whether or not to answer

that question. "My point is, do you think he did it?"

"No, of course not," said Neva. Daisy and Ramona did not give an immediate response, however.

"Okay, the fact that neither Daisy nor Ramona spoke up right away tells me that it may well be possible," said Toadette.

Neva sucked her teeth. "So you're gonna tell me that *they* know more about *my* boy than I do?"

"Hey – he's *my* best friend!" Ramona snapped. "Of course I know more than you do!"

"Best friend does *not* equal boyfriend, *Ramie* !" Neva taunted.

"It doesn't have to," Ramona said. "Best friend is *better* than boyfriend!"

"How is it better? You can't make out with your best friend, can you?"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, I know some other stuff you can't do with best friends either!"

"You haven't even kissed!"

"SO WHAT?! I *can* if I want to, and you *can't* !"

"I know everything about him! I've known him since we were both seven! He tells me everything!"

"Congratulations! You're his therapist!"

"I wish I had some popcorn and a recliner for this," Toadette whispered to Daisy.

"Alright, alright! CUT IT OUT!" Daisy yelled.

Neva and Ramona both calmed down and put an end to their conflict. At Daisy's urging, Ramona backed away in distressed discomfort from the fiery, steaming hot Kruna of Ice.

"You're both important to him, and he's important to you both," Daisy said. "But the more important thing than arguing about who's more important is to find out what happened to him so we can get him back."

"You're right," said Ramona. "I'm sorry for getting mad, Neva."

"Yeah, okay, sure, it's fine, or whatever," Neva grumbled. She let out a loud scream when she felt Daisy stomp on her foot.

"You're sorry too, right?!" Daisy growled.

"Yeah, yeah! Whatever!" Neva cried, hunched over.

"If we can't come up with anything right now, we may as well start making our way over to Castle Town," said Toadette. "I'm sure Bowser's waiting for us there."

"Yeah, and my dad too," added Daisy.

"Yeah – don't forget that jackass," Neva mumbled.

"We'll see how much of a jackass he may or may not still be when we get into Castle Town," said Daisy.

For as late as it was when Toadette piloted the Bullet Blitzer into Sarasaland Castle Town, she and her Kruna passengers had a good look at the brightened city below them. In stark contrast from its overall poor, decayed state during the Kruna's saga against Marissa, the whole area appeared exponentially more well-off. The copious amounts of lights lit up the night and revealed countless new and renovated buildings all throughout the town.

"King Sarasa and Bowser have been busy," Ramona said, gazing out at the developed and thriving community below her.

Unlike in Christmas Village but much like in Mushroom Kingdom, Daisy noticed a fair amount of technological advancements present throughout Sarasaland Castle Town. She also spotted plenty of robots and other automated machinery spread among the late night

population out and about. The few locations that they had stopped for breaks at along the way since leaving the Mushroom Kingdom had also sported some form of evolved technology, yet Daisy could not recall noticing it much in the areas she had ventured through during her quest for the Vranzer. So while the rapid technological advancement phenomenon did not seem to encompass the entire planet, it did at least extend beyond the Mushroom Kingdom's boundaries.

The Bullet Blitzer flew deep into Sarasaland Castle Town and passed Central Castle on its way towards the great, tall Sarasaland Campanile Clock Tower to touch down on the repaired circular terrace of the rainbow colored skywalk, Bellbridge. There, a more than familiar koopa of mighty stature stood in wait. The red pants he wore had yellow and orange flame designs running down the sides of his legs that resembled the blazing waviness of his hair, and his sizable spiked shell created an unmistakable silhouette. He also still had his Alkemei Kracielle, Pendant of Omnidirectional Vision.

When the Bullet Blitzer powered down and shut off, its pilot and riders disembarked onto the glass-metal-mix floor making up Bellbridge. Daisy, Toadette, Neva, and Ramona all gave Bowser, their fellow Kruna Yura of Fire, a warm greeting. Bowser did not show much in the way of enthusiasm for seeing them all again for the first time in a long while, but Daisy could tell how happy he actually was.

While Bowser led them through Bellbridge to its Central Castle roof exit, Daisy told him of her quest to acquire the Vranzer. Neva and Ramona then described the whole ordeal with Andrew's disappearance. By the time they got off of Bellbridge and onto the Central Castle roof, they had Bowser caught up with the entire situation.

"Never a dull moment," Bowser said with a sigh. He opened the doors to enter the castle and guided the group down the stairs. "Sucks to hear that Andrew's gone."

"What do you mean it sucks?" Neva grumbled. "It's the worst thing in the world that could ever happen. Ever."

"Okay, well I wouldn't say that it's the *worst* thing that could happen," stated Bowser.

"It is for me," said Neva. "That was my boy. That was my *boy* boy. My boy that I lucked out to get and'll never get another of. How stupid is that? Like, how would you like to win a lottery, but then your winning ticket just disappears?"

"Hey, the world's not a perfect place," said Bowser. "Not everything is gonna turn out perfect either."

"I just feel like you may be overreacting to this all because he's the first person you've developed real feelings for," said Toadette. "First love hurts the most, doesn't it?"

Neva turned glassy-eyed as they trekked along through the castle floors. "Sometimes when I'm just lying in bed by myself at night, I let this image of him sink into my head. He'll be standing out after a blizzard shirtless and in tight black pants, and he'll be rubbing snow all over himself. And steam would ooze off of him because he's always so hot. I just wanna smell him so badly right now... I never got a chance to nuzzle my face on his chest hair."

"Oh-kay! Too much information!" Daisy replied with an uneasy grin. "Did not need to mention that!"

"Yes, agreed," said Bowser. "That's something you keep to yourself."

"I really didn't need to hear that," mumbled Ramona.

Toadette shrugged. "I didn't mind it. At least she's being honest. Weird, but...eh."

"I don't need an image like *that* in my head *this* late at night!" Bowser snapped.

Neva yawned. "But I do, and that's the only time he's with me now: at night, in my dreams, when I'm asleep..."

"We have to get him back," Ramona murmured. "Somehow..."

"But how?" Neva barely said.

"There has to be something we can do that we just haven't figured out yet," said Bowser. "It'll come to us. It may not be as immediate as we would like, but...getting him back is not impossible..."

When silence had overcome the group, an unrelated thought surfaced in Daisy's mind for her to vocalize. "Yo, Bowser – there's this other thing that I'm getting really curious about. What's the deal with all these robots and MAE stuff?"

"I don't know much," said Bowser. "Neither your dad nor I do. We just know that in the months following our fight with Marissa, MAE has been appearing and spreading all over the place. They might have even been cropping up before then without us realizing it. Nobody knows where they came from or what they are other than that they're some sort of sovereign organization."

"What does 'sovereign organization' even mean?" Neva asked.

"It doesn't mean anything," said Bowser. "I literally just came up with it because that's the best way I can describe them. They're a production line – a manufacturer, a company, a franchise, a business – they're *all* of that. And on top of all of that, they're also a political entity that some recently are even recognizing as a nation or a collection of nations that are under the influence and authorization of MAE governing bodies."

"Is that a good thing?" asked Ramona.

"It's hard to tell," said Bowser. "At first glance, it is. Several nations across the world have formed agreements and pacts with MAE; and in doing so, those nations have been transforming into highly-industrialized technological metropolises. MAE is actually responsible for the increasingly rapid globalization of all these advanced, next-generation technologies – and at a truly remarkable pace, at that. It's becoming more widespread on a near-weekly basis."

"Wait, is that what happened here?" asked Daisy.

"No, no," said Bowser. "There are some MAE imports here, but your dad and I took care of the bulk of the collective rebuild of Sarasaland. I would take you guys to him, but he's over in Chai Kingdom for the next few days."

"Wow, and we were just over there too," said Daisy. "You guys did a pretty awesome job with Sarasaland, from what we could tell."

"King Sarasa had a lot of extra funds he donated to the community," said Bowser. "It's crazy the kind of turnaround he has had ever since the fight with Marissa. Sarasaland has had widespread prosperity throughout Castle Town and all four constituent kingdoms."

"So there's MAE stuff here, but MAE does not have any influence in Sarasaland from a political standpoint?" said Toadette.

"Yeah, that's right," said Bowser.

"That sounds like what's going on in the Mushroom Kingdom," said Toadette. "Because Peach hasn't mentioned anything about some MAE pact or agreement."

"Well, like I said; it's both an independent political entity and a business," Bowser replied. "I would advise Peach not to make any deal that involves any fusion or assimilation of MAE into the Mushroom Kingdom any more than MAE's presence there has already caused; and I'd definitely hold off on granting them any political power."

"I guess that's where the bad part about all this comes in, right?" said Neva.

"Pretty much," said Bowser. "What it all looks like to me is that MAE is enticing nations all over the world to join them by introducing their advanced technology and machinery into districts and societies as 'a taste' of what MAE could offer, so to speak. And then those that have reached some political agreement with MAE have experienced a technological boom, and that would encourage other nations to also join with MAE. *However,* despite the advancements they are now providing on a near-global level, MAE's practices have been questionable to outsiders; especially in the past week. Aside from

speculation over the special kinds of science and technology that are being heavily-controlled and restricted specifically to MAE nations, there's some investigation going on now over a potentially hostile takeover of Beanbean Kingdom."

"But that's, like, right next to Mushroom Kingdom!" exclaimed Toadette.

"And there have even been reports of acts of aggression against non-MAE nations," said Bowser. "So we don't know what to expect at this point. The media from MAE nations lets very little loose for us of the outside world. We don't even know who the head of MAE is – hell, we don't even know what 'MAE' stands for! We're dealing with a faceless organization whose only identity is through its machines and that winged emblem of theirs. But from what we can tell so far, it's a safe assumption that it's an oligarchy with more than one leader. Still, we can't even begin to speculate who those leaders are. Their motives are even more cryptic. At first, it started out as a completely benign, evolutionary movement. Now, I don't believe that that's an accurate statement anymore."

Ramona shuddered. "This is some creepy, creepy stuff, Bowser."

"Sounds to me like we're gonna have to do some personal investigating ourselves," said Daisy. "Especially if there's something shady going on at Beanbean Kingdom."

"I guess we may as well," muttered Neva. "Not like we have anything to work off of to find Andrew."

"Nothing yet, but something'll have to come up," said Toadette. "If there's police reports submitted, I'm sure it's only a matter of time before we hear something."

"Eh, er, well, seven months ago, he was reported missing," said Ramona.

"And nobody knows what's happened to Warra," said Daisy. "We can't even get in touch with him."

"So neither Andrew nor Warra will be with us if we do make a trip to

Beanbean Kingdom," said Ramona.

"We can at least have Athelstan and Marut meet us at Mushroom Kingdom," said Daisy.

"And I'm certain I can take leave from here without issue, considering the circumstances," said Bowser.

"Yeah, this is basically like, special assignment, or something," said Toadette.

"Alright, then I guess we gotta get going early tomorrow," said Daisy. "As soon as we wake up, huh?"

"Or at least close to it," said Bowser. "We can get to the Mushroom Kingdom by tomorrow evening."

"And then we can go from there," said Daisy. "There's no real urgency to hurry to Beanbean Kingdom as soon as possible – yet – but there might be something else that develops if we wait too long and MAE does turn out to be a problem."

Chapter VII

Venturing into a Mechanized Kingdom:

After an overnight stay in Central Castle, the group consisting of Daisy, Bowser, Neva, Ramona, and Toadette departed from Sarasaland Castle Town early the next afternoon in the Bullet Blitzer. Toadette sped the aircraft east across the Pyrimies Ocean and into the Western Hemisphere to get them into Mushroom Kingdom territory by the time that longitudinal region of Earth had entered the evening. Upon reaching Toad Town, the group headed straight for Bowser's Palace to check in with Toad and Alden. Again, the toad and koopa duo were tinkering with a prototype robot in the palace's workshop.

"Hey! You guys are back quicker than I thought you'd be gone," said Toad. "And you got Bowser and Ramona over here! Where's Shady?"

"We didn't find him," said Daisy.

"Oh wow; you guys sure gave up on him without much delay," said Toad.

"We didn't give up on him!" snapped Neva. "We just can't do anything about it right now."

"And we might have something more pressing developing nearby," said Bowser. "Have you noticed anything strange around here about any of these MAE robots, technology, or anyone associated with MAE?"

"Not really," said Toad. "But man, they just kinda came outta nowhere, didn't they? I'd say that's strange enough."

"I didn't even so much as hear about MAE until I began noticing their emblem and all of their stuff start popping up here," said Alden. "Should we be worried about them?"

"No," said Bowser. "Not yet, anyways. But in my duties in Sarasaland, I did hear of some intel regarding a possible hostile takeover of the Beanbean Kingdom involving MAE. The reports I've gotten have been inconclusive, though. So since that nation is nearby, I was thinking you'd know if something fishy was going on."

"Nah, we didn't notice anything," said Toad. "And Peach didn't mention anything either."

"Actually, not much in the way of news has come out of Beanbean as of late," said Alden.

Bowser grimaced. "Alright, set us up with some tools. We'll have to go in and check things out ourselves. And if we run into some trouble, we need to be prepared."

"Certainly," said Alden. "You're probably familiar with our firsthand, top-quality productions by now, so take your pick of our current and upgraded inventory!"

"And clear what you're going with with us," said Toad.

Toadette hung around Toad and Alden while Daisy, Bowser, Neva, and Ramona split up and browsed through the workshop's ready and available elemental tools. Much of what they saw featured a highly-advanced, futuristic aesthetic; a sharp contrast from the more traditional elemental tools the Kruna Yura were used to seeing. Even their Ultima Staffs from their time eight years into the future did not have the kind of technological innovation that the tools they saw before them now possessed.

While the four Kruna searched among the tools, a new figure entered through the workshop's doors. This stone wielder was almost comparable in size to Bowser, and he possessed a hulkish, exaggerated amount of muscularity. The darker shade of his skin almost seemed to blend with the sleeveless brown shirt he wore, and his gunmetal-fortified dark gray boots, tan pants, and tan baseball cap over his dark brown buzz cut hair provided contrast. The Alkemei Odina he wore, Pendant of Strength, could double his already immense physical might on activation. Despite his imposing figure and appearance, he had the jolliest, most carefree attitude

anyone in that room possessed.

When Daisy heard the door shut, she turned around and grinned at the newcomer. "Hey! Big Man Athelstan! What's up with ya!"

"Oh man, you would not believe the nonsense I've had to put up with in the past week!" Athelstan replied, walking up to Daisy to slap fives. "I'm glad you guys called me when you did, because I needed to get up outta Kallantown real quick!"

"What's going on in Kallantown?" asked Bowser.

Athelstan rubbed at his facial scruff. "Well, it went from a normal stretch of archival work to me receiving arrest threats, for one!"

"You? Arrested?" Neva said. "Pfft. Please."

"No, really!" Athelstan replied. "It was a super weird mandate they had approved earlier this week. The government there had ordered the abolishment of all forms of elemental wielding!"

Daisy grunted and gritted her teeth. "You can't be serious."

"That's crazy!" Neva shouted.

"I don't know what provoked it," said Athelstan. "But now, all elemental wielders are forced to either leave Kallantown within thirty days or face criminal punishment."

"That is so messed up," said Toadette.

"And so sudden too!" said Athelstan. "We didn't even get any warning or mention of the possibility of such a law beforehand, nor did we get to participate or even hear of any vote."

"Are you saying it was just forced on everyone there?" Toadette asked.

Athelstan's voice cracked to a near-comical but distressed degree when he responded. "Pretty much!"

"Athelstan, Kallantown wouldn't happen to be MAE-controlled, would

it?" asked Bowser.

"Actually, yes," the Kruna Yura of Stone replied. "Well, I don't know. I just work in the archives. I'm not an official or political figure, but I think it just may be. I sure have seen a lot of that winged emblem all over the place in the past handful of months."

"Pick out an elemental tool and get yourself prepared for a trip then," said Daisy. "We're paying a visit to MAE Beanbean Kingdom, southwest of here."

"I swear, this whole MAE thing is really creeping me out," said Neva.

"Seconded," said Ramona. "Something can't be right if they abolished elemental wielding. I mean, why would they want to do something like that? It hasn't done any harm to anybody."

"Except for when it comes to the jackasses like Kokoro," said Daisy. "Speaking of which, we all need to make sure we stay alert for him, because he could pop up anywhere and at any time."

"Noted," Bowser murmured, hoisting a thick sword with a flame-contoured blade. "Place your bets now: who'll be more of an issue? Kokoro or MAE?"

Athelstan bellowed a hearty laugh. "What's the over-under?"

"If this were yesterday, I would've said Kokoro," Daisy grumbled. "Now, I'm not so sure. But I guess we'll see later on tonight. Or tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow morning," said Bowser. "Early. Let's make sure we're well rested. And then we'll have the whole day tomorrow to figure something out about what's going on in Beanbean and with MAE."

"Right," said Daisy, her eyes shifting among the earth wielder elemental tools.

"Another potential calamity has pulled us away from normal life, huh?" Athelstan commented.

"I'll take it," said Neva. " 'Normal life' has sucked hard for me."

"Weren't you just complaining about this whole situation creeping you out?" said Daisy.

"Yeah, so?" Neva responded. "I know what I said, mud-mouth! Nobody said you had to comment on the answer I gave rock-for-brains over there!"

"Good to see you haven't changed much," Athelstan stated after a chuckle.

The five Kruna soon had their tools picked out and reported to Toad. Bowser still had his Blazer claws, but he also decided to take the flame-contoured Flare Sword that had a constant fire flow inside a translucent column in its blade body. Arming herself with a spiritual successor to her old crossbow, Neva hoisted the Freeze Coil Sniper with its neon blue laser sight onto her shoulder. She also picked out a Chill Sickle, which featured a neon blue light pattern in its blade face. Ramona chose the Solar Greatsword – a large sword sporting a neon gold blade body – and the Sun Shield, which held an ornamental sun shape to its mold and neon gold outlining. Athelstan went with the huge Mountain Hammer that had neon tan heads. He also donned a pair of dark gray Crush Gauntlets and equipped to his left shoulder and upper arm the brown and heavily-textured Metamorphic Shield, both of which possessed neon yellow outlining. In addition to the joint weights she always carried, Daisy now had a Laser Drill Staff with neon teal shaft lighting. All of the neon components the new elemental tools had ran through metal-braced, translucent columns or sections within the equipment's build. Though not obtrusive by any means and not attention-grabbing, the design choice made the Kruna curious.

"What're all these bright lights and such for?" Daisy asked.

"Oh, it's a new and ingenious feature we came up with!" said Alden. "It's the first step in fusing modern technology with elemental wielding! All these new, special tools are part of our *Energizer Series!*"

"Or 'E-Series' for short," added Toad.

"E-Series elemental tools..." Bowser said, giving his Flare Sword a

closer examination.

"What's so great about these?" Neva asked. "Yeah, they light up some; but how's that supposed to do anything?"

"So elemental tools have always made it so that wielding an element is easier and less energy-consuming, right?" said Toad. "Well, now, we went above and beyond that! These tools can actually *store energy* that you can use instead of your own or draw from if you yourself are out!"

A sly smirk crept on Neva's face. "That. Is. Totally. Sick."

"Totally!" Daisy hollered. "I didn't ever imagine something like that ever being possible!"

"It is now," said Toad. "So whenever you feel like you have a ton of extra energy that you need to burn off, just channel it into your tools. The tools'll hold them indefinitely. I mean, we're assuming that they can't hold them forever, but I'm pretty sure you could charge one up and then leave it alone for, like, a year or something. Think of it as a naturally rechargeable battery, and you're all chargers."

"How much power can these hold?" asked Bowser.

"Hard to say," Alden replied. "They're all scaled according to element; so the ice, light, and shadow ones'll generally hold more, and the stone and water ones'll hold less. And then there's more variance between individual tools too. But I'll tell you what; Marut was here a couple months ago when he was on a break from his Wario Ware job, and we had him test out the Energized Air Saber. He put in a pretty good amount of power before the saber stopped accepting it into its storage and released the excess. We can't show you that one, because we let him take it."

"Hey, yeah – Marut!" said Daisy. "We haven't even heard back from him yet! And we tried to reach him around the same time we got in touch with Athelstan!"

"He's probably just really busy at Wario Ware Inc., I'm sure," said Toad. "They usually have a heavy workload over there. You'll hear

from him soon."

"Unless he's missing too," mumbled Neva. "Andrew's gone, Warra's gone – oh, what's going on, why are people going missing, don't tell me you're all gonna disappear too, the team's falling apart-"

"No, Neva, no," said Daisy. "Everything will be fine. This'll be back to an eight-man party before long! Don't you worry."

Toad jumped upon remembering something. "Oh, this ought to be a big help too!"

The five Kruna, Alden, and Toadette watched Toad hurry to a large metal drawer and pull out a long case. Toad brought the case over to the Kruna and opened it to reveal eight circular handheld devices. The gadgets were color-coded to each individual Kruna and had a stylized "KY" emblazoned on the front. Small and stubby protrusions projected off the upper-right portion of each device.

"We were working on these for when you guys went on your next trip," said Toad. "They're your KY Communicators! Just flip them open for instant video and vocal communication! Although, you gotta make sure the battery's charged."

"Take them all with you!" said Alden. "That way, as soon as you run into any of the others, you can give them theirs!"

The five Kruna each took their respective KY Communicator. The devices were small enough to fit into just the palm of everyone's hand. While the other Kruna clipped their communicators to their Hammerspace Belts, Ramona took the extras and put them inside of her own belt.

"Thanks for the equipment, guys," Daisy said to Toad and Alden. She then turned to address the other Kruna. "We're all set to go now, right? Let's try to leave as early as possible in the morning."

Neva made a heavy exhale. "I don't know if I'm ready for this, but I'll try my best."

"You don't have to be perfectly ready in order to do something," said Daisy.

"To be fair, we don't really know what we'll be walking into," Ramona said.

"Hey, as long as we don't have to face another freakish monster deity or whatever again, I'm good," said Athelstan.

"If we do end up having to face a hellspawn again, I'll be bloody pissed-off," muttered Ramona. "Well, maybe more terrified, but still mad."

Neva frowned. "You know what – just because you two said that..."

"I doubt this'll turn out to be anything more than a bunch of tech nerds trying to promote their toys," said Daisy. "And if they're evil tech nerds, then I don't see us having much of a problem taking them down at all."

"Agreed," said Bowser. "This'll be over quick either way."

Bowser, Athelstan, and Ramona stayed overnight in Bowser's Palace, Neva returned to Peach's Castle for the night, and Daisy went to catch some sleep in her own house. At the first break of the summer morning sunrise, the five Kruna departed for a short flight to Beanbean Kingdom. Bowser took the helm of the Bullet Blitzer this time, so Toadette did not have to come along.

When the Kruna flew over Stardust Fields and into Beanbean's outskirts, the mechanization of the MAE-controlled Beanbean Kingdom was easily apparent. The Kruna could see all the mechanical and technological structures spread throughout the land below them in addition to the active construction sites they soared past. An equal amount of natural features and machinery made up the landscape, as did some instances of fusion between the two. The whole sight of the mechanized fields below inspired a sobering sense of unsettling melancholy. The lands looked ill and lifeless, as if downcast over the forced integration with the abundance of technology. Even the region's clouds appeared sickly, tinted a dirty gray as opposed to a healthy, clean white.

"This is horrible," said Daisy. "How are ya supposed to get flowers growing when most of the ground is either metal or covered with metal?"

"I'd like to know what the purpose of bracing trees with metal is," said Athelstan. "But hey, I got a lot to work with here if we run into trouble!"

"There's so many antennae and transmission towers all over the place," murmured Ramona. "And are you seeing all the wind turbines and solar panels?"

"They could have at least done a better job at concealing all the pipelines and cables," said Athelstan. "This all looks cluttered and untidy."

"I wouldn't expect everything to be neat with as fast as these guys seem to be working," said Bowser.

As a precaution, Bowser picked out a relatively remote location in the outskirts to land the Bullet Blitzer. The MAE officials, workers, and robots that spotted them spared a few glances their way but did not try to initiate contact or communication. That was a good sign, as far as the Kruna were concerned. No one bothered them on their way to Beanbean Castle Town either. Some of the MAE officials and robots even gave the Kruna pleasant, down-to-earth greetings when they walked by.

Upon reaching Beanbean Castle Town, the Kruna saw titanic buildings and towers sticking out from within the city walls. Some of the skyscrapers, both completed ones and ones still under construction, projected high over the lands to staggering heights. They could even see dozens of hovering vehicles soaring overhead in the skies over Castle Town.

"There's been some renovation since the last time I was here," murmured Bowser.

"I'm gonna assume that this place used to not be this built up," said Neva.

"Not nearly as much," said Bowser.

The group followed Bowser's lead into Beanbean Castle Town, en route to the kingdom's castle itself. So many buildings occluded their view, but Bowser's previous familiarity ensured that they would get to their intended destination. Along the way, they saw much of what they had seen in Mushroom Kingdom and Sarasaland as far as technological and mechanical advancement was concerned. However, the degree of modernization they observed there in Beanbean Castle Town trumped that found in Sarasaland and Mushroom Kingdom combined. Whereas the now hovering vehicles in the other kingdoms at least resembled what the Kruna had acknowledged as normal, the ones in BCT held a chrome, ultra-streamlined appearance akin to something out of a science fiction movie depicting a world several decades into the future. Robots ranged from simplistic machines to disconcertingly life-like androids. In fact, Athelstan had to get a second look at a Beanish couple that walked by to notice that the female was actually not organic – or at least, not fully organic.

In addition to the mass amount of artificial robot intelligence on the streets and the array of native Beanish residents, plenty of MAE-uniformed humans, koopas, and other beings – including other Beanish – marched throughout the town. The MAE officials clad in shiny combinations of white, grays, browns, blues, and golds with their winged emblems displayed on the shoulders, pants, and headwear of their uniforms stuck out from the rest of the crowd. The coloration seemed odd to the Kruna, for the MAE officials did not adhere to the uniform code for any of the elements.

"White, gray, brown, blue, gold – what does that mean?" asked Daisy. "That's combining stone and water, and probably light."

"I bet we can assume that MAE has no elemental affiliation," said Bowser.

"And no one working under MAE seems to be an elemental wielder either," said Neva.

"And with the ban on *all* elemental wielding in Kallantown, it doesn't seem like they're trying to single any particular element out," said

Athelstan. "If a similar ban pops up here or somewhere else, then MAE must have something against elemental wielding."

"Actually, I do remember talking to one of those police bots when I first got back with the Vranzer," Daisy remarked. "The bot said that elemental wielding is archaic and flawed, but it didn't even say why."

"Then I think we can say for certain that MAE really doesn't like elemental wielding," said Bowser.

"At least they're not being hostile towards us," said Ramona.

"Right now," said Neva.

"And that could change with minimal warning," said Athelstan. "Remember – I didn't get any warning about Kallantown abolishing wielding until after they passed the mandate. They're benign now, but if they think we're up to something, I'll bet they'll be on us like a horde of Chain Chomps."

"Hold on a minute," Daisy suddenly said. "I just thought of something! Let's go find a Patrol Bot!"

"For what?" asked Bowser.

"They had information on me when I mentioned my name to them!" Daisy replied. "I was in some sort of database they had! I bet if we mention Andrew, they might have him on file!"

Neva gasped. "Let's hurry up and go get that one up ahead!"

"Wait – are we *all* in whatever that 'database' is?" asked Bowser.

"Maybe," said Daisy. "They somehow had me in it."

"And it's a MAE database?" asked Athelstan.

"I don't know – could be," said Daisy. "I'm assuming it is."

"Oh-kay! Wow," said Athelstan. "That just made this whole situation even more disturbing."

Neva rushed ahead of the group to the Patrol Bot marching away in front of them. "Hey! MAE Patrol Bot dude!"

The Patrol Bot stopped its movement and turned around. "Hmm? Oh! Hi, smaller-than-average human!"

Daisy and Athelstan both burst out in laughter at the remark. Neva shot an icy glance their way when she heard them and growled, but that did not stop either one of them from laughing. Interestingly, the Patrol Bot seemed lacking in patience.

"We all know that I'm short, alright?!" Neva snapped at Daisy and Athelstan.

"What can I do for you, young and short lady?" the bot asked. "If you don't mind, I'm on shift right now; so if there's nothing you need from me, please do not try to grab my attention, *than - kyou* !"

"Whoa, these robots can voice crack like that?" said Athelstan.

"I think that was just its way of showing its irritability," said Ramona.

"Yes, I am irritable today!" the Patrol Bot said. "I was supposed to have today off, but Model LDU-01265 was malfunctioning, so it is in the shop for maintenance and repairs. Really, I think that model is faking it so that it can get out of patrol duty for the day; but you didn't hear that from me."

"I didn't think a robot would complain about its work schedule," said Bowser.

"Yes, artificial intelligence needs days off too," the Patrol Bot replied. "What makes you organic lifeforms so special?"

"Look, never mind that," said Daisy. "Can you tell us where Andrew Mitchell is? Kruna Yura of Shadow, Andrew Mitchell."

"Andrew Mitchell, Kruna Yura of Shadow," the Patrol Bot said. "Computing... Loading... Andrew Mitchell, native and resident of Christmas Village. Age, twenty. Height, five-ten; weight, 184 pounds, athletic build with prominent muscular development. Hair, black; eyes, light brown. A shadow wielder possessing very high strength,

speed, power, and agility along with an aggressive combat style – but control and technique are otherwise subpar and limiting. Reported missing seven months ago. Last known location: Christmas Village."

"Well, that didn't tell us anything we didn't already know," mumbled Ramona.

"Okay – first of all, why is there data on stuff like strength and speed?" asked Bowser. "Second, how could they have even assessed his technique? That's kind of a subjective thing, isn't it? It's at least something they'd need to analyze."

"I guess that depends on how they gather their data," said Athelstan.

Neva frowned. "Are we being watched?"

"Hey, yeah – are we?" Daisy asked the Patrol Bot.

"Admin code has blocked access to such information, sorry," said the Patrol Bot. "MAE guidelines prohibit distribution of classified information to those other than registered and qualified MAE personnel."

With that, the MAE Patrol Bot turned and continued on its way. Neva would have charged full-steam at it had Daisy not caught her and held her back. Angered with the restraint, Neva growled at Daisy.

"What are you growling at me for?" said Daisy. "You were about to do something stupid and attack a cop!"

"A robo-cop," corrected Athelstan.

"Yeah, so?" snapped Neva. "That heap of metal was hiding answers!"

"If you had attacked that bot, then however many else there are nearby would've swarmed us," said Bowser. "And then, we're automatically labeled as enemies to MAE. And if they *are* watching us somehow, then that would just make them watch that much closer. *And* that probably gives us a bad reputation to the public both inside and outside of MAE jurisdiction. We don't want any of

that."

"And, we could still ask one of those bots about where Warra is too," Daisy added. "I don't think they'd share that information if they think we're enemies."

Neva sighed as Daisy let go of her. "Fine, whatever," the ice wielder grumbled.

"What we need to do is get to the castle," said Bowser. "If the bots don't want to give us answers, somebody over there better. It's too bad we couldn't figure out where Andrew is, but we need to get to the bottom of what happened regarding this kingdom's joining with MAE."

The five Kruna met an alarming surprise upon crossing over the bridge to Beanbean Castle's entrance. A massive set of metallic, bolted doors barred them from progressing inside. The doors had no hinges, instead featuring gears along its frame. Just seconds after the Kruna stepped near the doors, the lone MAE emblem centered at the top of the door frame lit up with a bright golden hue. Twin cameras positioned at either top corner of the frame activated and angled their sights at the five assembled elemental wielders. Even though the sun was out, a pair of spotlights on either side of the MAE emblem also turned on.

"Big, ominous doors don't seem like a good sign, if you ask me," said Ramona.

The Kruna then learned of speakers in the door frame when a distorted male voice spoke to them. "Civilian access into MAE Beanbean Castle is prohibited. Have a nice day. Goodb-"

"How about you prohibit my fist from your face before you try to prohibit us?" snapped Neva.

"Excuse me?" the voice responded.

"This castle is not MAE's!" Daisy barked. "This is Beanbean's, and Beanbean Kingdom doesn't belong to you! You need to tell us how

you people got in here, and you better do it fast!"

"Ah, you must be tourists or have returned from some extended vacation," the voice said. "Beanbean Kingdom is in fact an established MAE territory now."

"Can we see Queen Bean?" Bowser asked.

"For what reason?" the voice asked.

"So that she can tell us herself what's going on," said Bowser.

"I'm sure that Queen Bean is too busy with something important to concern herself with conspiracy theorists," the voice said.

"You've got the Princess of Sarasaland here and Sarasaland's Prime Minister alongside of her," Bowser asserted. "Let us in or send Queen Bean out. Prince Peasley or Lady Lima would suffice as well if she's truly busy, but we need some answers here. And we're not leaving until we get answers. Or else, you're gonna have to face heat from Sarasaland, whether that be investigations, sanctions, or otherwise. And then, you're gonna have to deal with the Koopa Clan; because I'll alert them all to be suspicious of you, and you'll have *them* on standby in case you overstep your boundaries and try something funny. *And then* , I'll have the Mushroom Kingdom ready to act; because I've got plenty of connections with them too, and they're *right* next door from here! Didn't take us very long to get here, now did it?"

"Nope," Daisy said.

"So send somebody out here who can tell us what happened that turned Beanbean Kingdom over to MAE control," said Bowser. "Three options – Queen Bean, Prince Peasley, Lady Lima. Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

The voice speaking to them remained silent for a while, mulling the whole situation over. "Alright. Stay there, and I'll see what I can do."

"Nice, Bowser," said Athelstan. "Fantastic job handling that guy!"

"I say we just bust in there and start tearing the place up," stated

Neva.

"Maybe in the near future," said Daisy. "But not yet. Not right now. We'll have to see what whoever comes out says about what's been going on here."

The Kruna waited for a short while at the doors before they noticed the gears around the door frame start churning. The two doors split down the middle and pulled away under the force of the gears, revealing a set of five figures standing within the castle doors. None of the new figures resembled who Bowser had asked for.

"I gave that guy three options," mumbled Bowser. "What the hell is this?"

A cute and pleasant human girl of black hair and fair skin stepped out of the doors, flanked by two Patrol Bots and a pair of Shy Guy associates. Like the two Shy Guys, the girl had on some sort of imperial uniform predominantly colored white, gray, and brown. Unlike the ones the Shy Guys wore, hers was more complex in comparison. The fronts of their uniform tops and hats sported the MAE emblem, but neither the girl nor the Shy Guys seemed at all malevolent in appearance or mannerisms.

"Greetings, friends," said the girl. "My name is Sydney Buinton. I am a MAE ambassador and the head of the project for MAE's expansion into the Beanbean Kingdom's lands. Through recent diplomatic relations, Beanbean Kingdom is now an official MAE territory. There is no need for hostility or aggression. The negotiations made here were peaceful."

"I'd like to hear that from Queen Bean herself," said Bowser. "I asked for Queen Bean, not some ambassador."

Sydney chuckled. "Per the mandate that allowed for the assimilation of Beanbean Kingdom into MAE sovereignty, I am now in charge of these lands. Please direct your gripes with MAE Beanbean towards me."

"I want to speak with Queen Bean," said Bowser. "That's who I asked for."

"I have superseded Queen Bean's role," said Sydney. "She now has a different position in the government here. There is no need to speak with her. I am here to converse with you and assure you of the mutual agreements made between Beanbean and MAE."

"I don't care – just take us to her," said Bowser. "If she's busy, then take us to either Prince Peasley or Lady Lima."

Sydney nodded. "Hmm...yes, well, they're *all* actually quite busy at the moment, so you can not speak with any one of them. I apologize for the inconvenience. How about instead, would you like to take a tour of the new-look Beanbean in progress? You can get a sneak peak preview of what to expect in the coming months out of the enhanced addition to MAE."

"Listen – we don't care about some stupid tour, ya hear?" Neva snapped. "Just give us who we asked for!"

"We want to know what went on during this supposed 'mutual agreement,' " said Daisy. "We have reason to believe that something violent or otherwise underhanded went on here, so let us talk to the people who were actually here *before* you MAE people showed up."

"Or, like I already said, we're gonna have a *lot* of issues," added Bowser. "Again, I've got connections that can make life for you guys hard, so you better give us what we came here for – and that's answers. And *your* answers aren't good enough."

Sydney bent over to let one of the Shy Guys next to her whisper into her ear. Her expression blank, she nodded in full understanding after he had finished speaking.

"Very well," replied Sydney. "It's probably for the best. You're right." She then stood upright and addressed the Kruna. "We certainly don't want to cause any more of an uproar than we may already have. We apologize for any ill feelings you may have developed towards MAE. As you requested, we will direct you to where you can find Queen Bean. Please do respect her and her duties if you catch her at a busy time."

"Thank you," Bowser said.

"You may find Queen Bean to the north of here," said Sydney. "She is currently overseeing the urbanization project in Download Desert, formerly known as Teehee Valley. If you really would feel better hearing the same information from her that you heard from me, then venture there to one of the many construction sites scattered throughout the desert. She will be out there all day, so you'll surely run into her at some point before sunset."

"Alright, then we are done here," said Bowser. "Thank you for your cooperation, Sydney."

"Finally," Daisy added.

"Yes, you're welcome," said Sydney. "It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I hope your experience in MAE Beanbean is a truly memorable one. Goodbye."

Neva scowled at Sydney, but Daisy urged her on and away from the castle with the rest of the Kruna. As Sydney watched the Kruna depart and begin their quest out to Download Desert, she pulled out her phone to make a call.

Chapter VIII

Tricks and Traps:

With as close as Download Desert, the area formerly known as Teehee Valley, was, the five Kruna Yura trekked there from Beanbean Castle Town on foot and with the aid of a convenient Warp Pipe. The Kruna stepped into a harsh environment baking in dry summer heat and littered with both heavy mechanization and ongoing construction projects. Desert rigs, towers, and even metal pyramids occupied roughly half of the otherwise barren landscape.

In their search throughout the region, the Kruna picked out one of the MAE robots not busy in order to speak with it. However, they soon learned that that construction robot did not have the same access the Patrol Bots had to whatever database held records for Daisy, Andrew, and likely all the other Kruna. With the large amount of MAE personnel and robots in the region, the Kruna managed to find an idle Patrol Bot without much difficulty in an attempt to procure information about their water teammate.

"Warra Jidlaph, Kruna Yura of Water," the Patrol Bot said. "Age, twenty-seven. Height, five-eleven; weight, 166 pounds, fit and athletic build. Hair, brown; eyes, brown. A highly experienced warrior and water wielder with all-around balanced physical capabilities and a tactical approach. Previously a part of Mekarsari's Royal Guard. Last updated location: Isle Delfino, updated three months ago. Current status information unavailable."

"What does that last part mean?" asked Daisy.

"Current status information unavailable?" the Patrol Bot said. "That means that either there is no data available in order to update the current location and status of the person in question, or the server is blocking access to information. Patrol Bots are not authorized to release restricted information to non-MAE personnel."

"But that didn't come out when we asked about Andrew," said Neva.

"That might have been because he was reported missing, maybe?" said Athelstan. "That must not come up if the person is already reported missing, because it would be rather obvious at that point that current information would not be available."

"Or it's restricted, like the robot said it could be," Bowser remarked.

"But why would *his* be restricted, but Andrew's wouldn't?" asked Ramona.

"Hold on – let's ask him something about somebody else," said Daisy. "Like... Oh, Patrol Bot! Can you tell us about Marut? Marut Kaze, Kruna Yura of Air?"

"Searching..." the Patrol Bot responded. "File found. Marut Kaze, Kruna Yura of Air. Age, nineteen. Height, six-one; weight, 152 pounds, a slim and lanky physique. Hair, black; eyes, brown. Former resident of Nimbus Land. This air wielder is among the fastest physical specimens on the planet, but he possesses mediocre strength and endurance. Still, high power and the ability to stretch said power across a wide-range make for both an offensive and defensive threat. Last known location: Diamond City."

"Again, I don't understand all the emphasis on strengths and weaknesses," said Bowser. "It's like whoever's running this database is treating us all like we're video game characters with all these stats and analysis of physical abilities."

"Patrol Bot, when was the last known location for Marut updated?" Daisy asked.

"Twenty-three minutes ago," the bot replied.

"Okay, so he's obviously still working with Wario at Wario Ware Inc. then," Daisy said. "So we know where Marut is, we don't know where Andrew is, and we either don't know or aren't allowed to know where Warra is."

Neva clutched her head and groaned. "What is going on with all of this?"

"Alright, I've got one more person to ask about," Daisy said. "Patrol

Bot, pull up info for Neva Alekseeva, Kruna Yura of Ice."

"Huh? Why me?!" said Neva.

"Just go with it," Daisy hissed.

"Neva Alekseeva, Kruna Yura of ice," the bot said. "Age, nineteen. Height, four-ten-"

"FIVE FEET, DAMN IT!" Neva screamed.

"Neva!" Daisy yelled. "Let the guy finish!"

"The *robot* finish," said Athelstan.

"Whatever!" Daisy said.

"Height, four-ten," the Patrol Bot said. "Weight, 114 pounds, a petite and thin build. Hair, very light blonde; eyes, blue. This speedy and swift ice wielder possesses an exceptional amount of power and the scope to use it at long range. However, strength and endurance are sorely lacking. Her body is frail and unimpressive, and both her weight and height are well below average. Last known location: Download Desert, Beanbean Kingdom."

"Gee, thanks for crapping all over me, asshat," Neva muttered.

"Never mind that," said Daisy. "When was the last known location updated, Patrol Bot?"

"Ten minutes ago," the bot replied.

"Okay – *that's* the important part," said Daisy. "Because when I told that one bot who I was right after returning to Mushroom Kingdom, it updated my location right then and there on the spot."

"And we have only been talking to this robot for maybe around five minutes," said Bowser. "And it knows that this is Neva, but it did not update its location for her. So this is essentially telling us that we're being tracked at this very moment, because Neva was already labeled as being here."

"But the robot did not know who *I* was until I said my name," added Daisy. "And that's when it updated, so I could have been on record for being somewhere else, and that could be why it updated for me and not for Neva. I don't feel like it's the robots themselves that are tracking us."

"So we're being watched, but we don't know how we're being watched," said Neva.

"These Patrol Bots are just keeping tabs on things," said Bowser. "They're secondary. They're not the ones blatantly watching us. Something else has to be."

"We're being watched *and* analyzed," said Athelstan. "Boy, this is some real creepy stuff going on here."

"I haven't seen anything that could have been watching us," said Bowser. "But my pendant just gives me full-360-degree vision alone, not eagle eyes to go with it."

"Your discussion gives me the impression that you are up to some sort of plot," said the Patrol Bot. "Out of caution, I am withholding answers to any further questions regarding people's data."

"Um, no – we're not up to anything," said Daisy. "Everything's fine. We got what we needed. We just needed to figure out where our friends are. Thanks."

"You're welcome, earth wielder," said the Patrol Bot, turning to march away.

"I can't get over how smart these guys have made their robots," said Athelstan. "I mean, they're miles away from anything not out of MAE. We could be dealing with something more than dozens of steps ahead of us."

"If technology is the be-all, end-all to everything, then sure," said Daisy. "But them having a bunch of gadgets doesn't mean they're better than us."

"Excuse me," a koopa MAE official said on her way over from a nearby construction site. "What exactly are you five doing out here?

This location is not a good spot for tourism at the moment."

"We're out here looking for Queen Bean," said Bowser. "We've been told that we could find her in the desert here overseeing some construction projects."

"Oh, yes, yes," said the MAE official. "I did receive a call from Ambassador Buinton notifying me to be on the lookout for a group of elemental wielders in case they needed help looking for just that person. So I'll assume that you're the group she was talking about. Yes, I know exactly where Queen Bean is. Just follow me."

"Excellent," said Daisy. "We're *finally* gonna get some answers to all of this."

"Great," grumbled Neva. "I can't stand being out in this heat any longer than we've already been. I think my sweat is sweating."

The MAE official directed the five Kruna past several other established mechanized locations and active, in-progress construction sites within Download Desert. At no point did any of the Kruna see or sense any other elemental wielders or other beings of elevated power anywhere in the desert region. They were the odd men out in the sea of MAE personnel and MAE robots. Any utility elemental wielding would have had there, automated technology and machinery accounted for and handled – and at a faster pace too. Advanced drills, bulldozers, cranes, excavators, and plenty more innovated machines outpaced what an equal number of average stone wielders could have done in manipulating the sandy terrain and piecing metal components of varying sizes together. The same applied for all the other landscaping and construction tasks that took place; tasks that fire wielders, earth wielders, air wielders, water wielders, and light wielders also would have taken part in. Though elemental wielders could have done much of the work quicker at first, they would have tired out too soon and too often to match the relatively constant high output of the automated and semi-automated machines.

Interestingly, the koopa MAE official did not lead the Kruna to any of the construction sites. Instead, she led them into a lower part of Download Desert and to a massive, fenced-off sandy pit with piles of

metal objects near the corners where tall towers stood. The chain-link fence stretched several dozens of feet in height and then curved inwards near the top, and the doors that granted access inside looked identical to the ones at Beanbean Castle.

"This place seems kind of empty, doesn't it?" asked Bowser. "Why would Queen Bean be overseeing anything here?"

"Follow me inside," the MAE official replied. "I'll lead you to one of the watch towers so you can see for yourself."

The great MAE doors pulled apart to open up the caged sandpit, and the Kruna followed the MAE official as she passed through the entryway. Bowser, Athelstan, and Neva kept shifting their gazes in nearly every direction as the group went around the sloping sides of the pit to the base of a tower on the side opposite of the doors. Once at the door leading into the tower, the MAE official made an abrupt stop.

"This went pretty well, I'd say," the MAE official murmured.

"Huh?" Daisy said. "What do you mean by that?"

Ramona shrugged. "Is it sarcasm?"

The MAE official did not respond. She opened the door to the tower and walked in, saying nothing. But before any of the Kruna could follow her in, she slammed the door shut and locked it.

"Um...okay?" said Athelstan.

"That was abrupt," said Ramona.

"I don't like this," said Neva. "She was already looking kind of suspicious from the moment we saw her."

"Everyone in MAE uniform has seemed suspicious," said Daisy.

"Look up!" Bowser called out.

The Kruna backed away from the tower and stared at its observation deck to see the MAE official pointing behind them with some sort of

remote device. Before they could turn all the way around to see where she was pointing, the doors out of the sandpit closed and bolted shut. The MAE official put away the remote that she used to close the doors the instant the Kruna glanced back at her.

"Hey – what's the big idea here?!" Neva yelled at the official.

The MAE official pulled out a wireless controller and pressed several buttons in rapid succession. A rumbling then rattled the sandpit and the fencing. Heaps of metal pulled together and assembled from the scattered piles to form a colossal, two-legged robot with a red-eyed head resembling that of a Snifit. The newly formed mechanical body stomped both of its thick legs on the sandy ground just a handful of yards away from the Kruna and let loose columns of steam from its nose, two holes at the top of its head, and its glass underside.

"This is a trap, isn't it," grumbled Neva.

Athelstan frowned. "Wait a minute – how did this happen? We're smarter than this!"

"We actually are," said Bowser.

"Sorry, but you won't get to see Queen Bean today!" the MAE official shouted down. "Don't worry about her – so long as she adheres to MAE guidelines, she can enjoy a productive and fulfilling life in MAE society. You five, on the other hand, will not get that luxury. Instead, you get to do battle against our auto-assembling Desert Battle Droid: Digga-Leg!"

Daisy put her knuckles to her hips and rolled her eyes. "Oh boy."

"How come we have to fight your stupid robot?" asked Neva. "We didn't even do anything!"

"I'm just following orders," the MAE official responded. "And by order of Commander Sydney Buinton, you five elemental wielders must be TERMINATED!"

Digga-Leg trudged towards the Kruna and forced them to scatter and jump out of the way of its accelerating charge. The robot then swiveled towards Bowser and Ramona and rushed at them, but they

evaded in time. When it passed by them, Digga-Leg released yellow Digga Drill missiles from a slot in its glass underside. The six Diggas sank into the sand and carved their way at the Kruna with power and speed.

"Oh, straight bollocks!" Ramona shouted.

Each of the Kruna leapt over the seemingly landlocked Diggas, only for them to lunge out of the sand and short hop into the air themselves. Athelstan and Bowser both felt the bodies of the drilling missiles clip into their legs mid-jump, and both those two Diggas and the other ones exploded upon contact with either other pieces of metal or the fence. Blasts of sand flew everywhere as a result, making that portion of the sandpit uneven.

"Any hit from metal is never fun," Bowser grunted as he landed.

"Better the body than its drilling head," said Athelstan.

When Digga-Leg turned around to face the Kruna, it shot Digga missiles from its nose snout. The seven that came out shot through the air and flew noticeably faster than the ones that tore along the ground. Ramona and Athelstan both got their respective shields in position to block, Bowser deflected one off of a spin inside of his shell, Neva skipped around the two that hurtled at her, and Daisy pulled her Laser Drill Staff off of her back in an Iaido swing that batted the missile that flew at her into the curved top of the fence.

Digga-Leg once more attempted to ram itself into the Kruna, but it missed each one in turn. For as surprisingly speedy as its movement was, the Kruna did not have too much issue maneuvering out of its straight-line rushes. When it felt an ice bullet strike its head, Digga-Leg directed its attention at Neva. The Kruna of Ice stood in front of a corner tower with her Freeze Coil Sniper out and still targeted at Digga-Leg's head. A second, third, fourth, and fifth shot on the robot all did damage, but it did not do enough to stop the robot from rushing at Neva. A timely jump not only got her out of the way but also made Digga-Leg slam into the tower behind where she formerly stood.

"Alright, this is a nice toy and all, but let's just put this to rest before

things get stupid," Athelstan said.

Unlimbering his Mountain Hammer from his back, Athelstan focused his stone elemental power through the tool and directed it at the stunned Digga-Leg. He wanted to gain influence over the entirety of Digga-Leg altogether; but after several moments and attempts at manipulating the robot, he withdrew and eased his focus. Baffled, he stared at his hammer in confusion.

"Okay, never mind," said Athelstan. "For some reason, I can't control any of Digga-Leg's metal."

"All MAE products have been optimized to safeguard against stone wielder manipulation of metal components," the official called down from her vantage point in her tower. "You can not control Digga-Leg any more than any other elemental wielder can."

"Aw, that's bull!" Neva screamed. "And I was thinking we could just have Athelstan tear through all this MAE crap!"

Athelstan shrugged. "I can still do this-"

The Kruna of Stone slammed his hammer into the sandy ground, his influence over the sand creating cascading mounds that hurried toward Digga-Leg and pounded its glass underside to broken shards. The massive robot then staggered in place, trying to maintain its balance. Eventually, it toppled over.

"I don't understand the design choice behind glass," said Athelstan. "But in any case, looks like that was the sweet spot!"

"Nice, so, are we done here?" asked Neva.

The MAE official pressed more buttons in rapid succession. "You must be foolish to think that you can wriggle your way out of this so easily."

Digga-Leg stirred and cranked back to its feet, reestablishing its balance through its piston-laden legs. Its head-body opened up above its eyes and put out a large drill. Once its drill locked into place, Digga-Leg transmitted some of its power supply through to the newly revealed appendage. Digga-Leg then angled its drill-head

at the ground and burrowed underneath it. Before long, the Kruna could hear grinding and scraping but could not see anything aside from an occasional bump in the sand. No one could tell where the robot was heading, for the mounds popped up at random.

Athelstan made a clipped chuckle and heaved his Mountain Hammer up for a hard, ground-shaking slam onto the sand. His move forced Digga-Leg to the surface right in front of Ramona, sprawled out and stunned. A second Hammer Ground Pound projected a dense fist of sand up under Digga-Leg that bashed it skyward. Ramona cleared out of the way to save herself from the colossal robot's landing and the cloud of sand that kicked up all around as a result of its impact.

"Really, you guys should not have tried to trap us out in a desert," Athelstan said. "For sure shouldn't have tried to trap a stone wielder in a desert. So that's foolish on your part."

"Who is the bigger fool?" the MAE official responded. "The fool, or the fool who follows the fool?"

"Are you acknowledging yourself as a fool?" said Athelstan.

"I'm no fool compared to you!" the official barked.

Now back to standing, Digga-Leg churned up its power output and again made a digging dive into the sand. It did not stay underground for long this time, for it busted out from under it seconds after entering. Its legs smacked Daisy and Neva as it hopped into the air and arced back into the sandy ground. Just a moment later, it lunged out from the sand at Bowser and nearly put its drill-head into his shell. Bowser ducked in time, and Digga-Leg soared over him just to dive under the sand again.

"What are we dealing with here – a dolphin?" Neva grunted.

"This is one dry dolphin," said Daisy.

"Then it's time to go dry fishing!" Athelstan hollered, hammering his hammer into the sand once more.

The hit jolted Digga-Leg up out of its burrowing and surfaced it near

Daisy. Athelstan pointed his hammer with a spiraling motion to mold the sand in the immediate area surrounding Digga-Leg around the robot's legs. Now captive, Digga-Leg tried to wriggle and force its way free.

"Hey! I'll trap it so that one of you guys can do the hard hitting!" Athelstan yelled.

"I'll do that hard hitting!" declared Daisy. The earth-devoid environment meant that she had to spend time creating earth, which delayed her Crystal Fist formation long enough for Digga-Leg to bust free. However, Athelstan caught the robot again right before it could escape under the sand. Digga-Leg only got loose from the second set of binds after Daisy's heavy Crystal Fist jarred it free and bashed it into one of the corner towers. In addition to the harm Daisy's hit did, the tower crumbled and collapsed on top of Digga-Leg to worsen the robot's damage.

While Digga-Leg recovered, Ramona imbued her Solar Greatsword with light and Neva took aim with her sniper. Daisy reformed the shattered pieces of her Crystal Fist back together to have it ready for a second strike, and Bowser primed his Flare Sword with blazing flames. Digga-Leg displayed extensive amounts of damage around its form when it busted out of the wreckage surrounding it, but it experienced no loss in function. Ramona, Neva, and Bowser fired off elemental bursts from their tools at Digga-Leg to stall it while Daisy and Athelstan approached it. After several light, ice, and fire blasts bombarded Digga-Leg, Athelstan ripped a ridge through the sand to lock one of the robot's legs in place. Daisy then got in a second smashing Crystal Fist hit on the immobilized robot and sent it into the fence behind it. Digga-Leg's weight tore a great hole in the fence upon contact as it tumbled out of the caged arena, but the Kruna were not finished with the robot yet. Digga-Leg rolled out of its tumble to its feet and ramped up its power output even more.

"Uh-oh – I think we made it mad," said Athelstan. "I mean, if it can feel anger, that is. I'm not entirely sure at this point."

"I'll give it one more hit and it'll be sure to calm down," Daisy said. As the other Kruna regrouped with her and Athelstan, she gathered seismic energy into her clenched right hand to prepare her

widespread Shotgun attack.

"Why don't you just keep doing Crystal Fist?" asked Neva.

"I gotta mix it up!" Daisy replied. "I can't just use Crystal Fist every time! That gets stale!"

"But you *could* though," Ramona said.

Daisy paused for a brief moment before giving a hurried reply. "Yeah – you're right." She dispelled her seismic energy the next second and pulled the shattered crystal in the area back together in her other hand to switch to making yet another Crystal Fist.

"Pfft – MASTER persuasion," Neva said.

"I didn't want to just stick to one move the whole time," Daisy said, holding up her crystallized hand. "But punching stuff with this is more fun anyways."

Digga-Leg rushed at them with even more speed than before, reentering the sandpit area. While the other Kruna spread and shifted out of Digga-Leg's line of travel, Athelstan amplified his physical might with his Alkemei Odina and got himself set to swing at the incoming robot. However, Digga-Leg jumped over Athelstan the moment it got near enough for him to attempt his attack. The Kruna of Stone caught nothing but air, and Digga-Leg made a drill-head-first landing a far distance behind him back underground.

The whole sandpit then trembled as Diggas missiles surfaced all over the place and darted along the ground in every direction. While the Kruna were busy evading and jumping off of the smooth bodies of the Diggas, Digga-Leg erupted from the center of the pit and launched itself into the air again. In kicking up sand upon landing, Digga-Leg also jolted some of its Diggas airborne as well. Thanks to the Kruna's collective dodging, shielding, and countering; the Diggas failed to harm them and instead bombarded the piles of metal, blitzed the fences, and blasted chunks away from the remaining towers – including the one the MAE official had positioned herself in.

Daisy and Athelstan got set to try and smash Digga-Leg with what

could possibly be the final attack considering how battered the robot was. However, their attention got diverted to the tower that leaned over the indents Digga-Leg's missiles had drilled and blasted away. The MAE official inside could do nothing to save herself, and she collapsed along with the tower itself into the sand. The remote for Digga-Leg flew out from the crash and skidded to a stop alongside the fence.

The distraction granted enough time for Digga-Leg to execute another move. It powered up its drill-head with an electric charge and pounded it into the ground to lace the sandpit with electric jolts. The Kruna could do little to protect against the random, unpredictable nature of the attack. Bowser, Ramona, and Neva all sustained violent shocks, and whatever stray Diggas that got hit exploded on contact. After the electric attack ceased, the tracks through which all the shocks had spread in the sand fused and hardened into branching streaks of fulgurite reaching out from the epicenter of the electric attack.

"We gotta finish this now, Athelstan!" Daisy urged as she glanced at the three downed and ailing Kruna. "Get that thing locked down while it's vulnerable!"

Athelstan nodded and waved his hammer at Digga-Leg, ensnaring both of its legs in sand. Using exceptional speed in her approach, Daisy rushed ahead and struck Digga-Leg with the Crystal Fist she had maintained throughout the robot's previous sequence of attacks. That hit was too much for Digga-Leg to endure in addition to the damage it had accumulated throughout the battle. Not only did Daisy's hit devastate the robot's head-body, but it also ripped it off of its legs. Daisy dispelled her Crystal Fist upon landing and watched Digga-Leg's drill-head-body ricochet out of a few tumbles along the ground and off of the fence to a dead stop. With a hefty exhale, Daisy trotted towards Neva.

Just mere moments after Daisy turned away, Athelstan activated his Odina again and dashed past her with his hammer up and ready to strike. Confused, Daisy turned back around and saw Digga-Leg's drill-head-body roll at them and then lodge its drill into the ground to unleash one last rushing attack. Athelstan stopped his momentum when he saw that the enemy started accelerating by way of its

drilling. It all came down to Athelstan timing his swing to land a strike on the Digga-Leg Core, for it made no deviation in its path and only sped up as time went on.

The baseball stance setup and the golf-like motion Athelstan swung with delivered the hit into the tip of the incoming robot's drill and overpowered it altogether. His monstrous force transmitted through the drill and rocked the Digga-Leg Core to so hard of a degree, it dismantled upon contact in an explosive manner and sprayed in every direction in front of him. Aside from its separated legs, Digga-Leg now lay scattered in hundreds of mangled pieces. And suddenly, the sandpit became quiet.

" *That* was just unnecessary," Athelstan said with a twirl of his hammer.

Daisy gave Neva an Ultra Mushroom and tried to get the wailing ice wielder to calm down from Digga-Leg's electric shock. Athelstan went to go give Ultra Mushrooms to Bowser and Ramona once he noticed how long Daisy was taking with Neva. All three of the Kruna Digga-Leg's electricity had jolted experienced a severe amount of trauma that took an extended period of time to get up from even after ingesting recovery items. In the time it took Bowser, Neva, and Ramona to feel at least somewhat better, the MAE official never rose from the wreckage of her tower.

"I can not believe how crazy that thing was," said Neva.

"My gosh – tough first enemy!" Ramona cried. "That escalated way too much and way too quickly!"

"We can't stay here and dwell on it," said Daisy. "We gotta get moving before somebody sees what happened here."

"Aren't we still locked in?" asked Neva.

"Not after Digga-Leg tore that hole in the fence back there," said Bowser.

"Are we going back to the Bullet Blitzer?" Athelstan asked.

Daisy shook her head. "Let's hurry back to Beanbean Castle first

and thank Sydney for trying to kill us."

Chapter IX

Symmetric Build:

Daisy, Bowser, Athelstan, Ramona, and Neva rushed back into Beanbean Castle Town as the setting sun began to turn the sky gold and red. Their haste was fueled by a need to get to Ambassador – or Commander, as that one MAE official put it – Sydney Buinton before word spread of the happenings in Download Desert at that one caged-off sandpit with Digga-Leg. As far as they knew, no one had seen anything of the clash. Commander Buinton apparently must have ordered the MAE official to take them somewhere discreet for their execution, for the sandpit where the Digga-Leg fight occurred seemed remote.

The Kruna reached the doors to Beanbean Castle and waited for someone to call to them through the speakers, but no one did. Athelstan could not open the stone wielder-proofed MAE doors either. With nothing happening, Daisy then made the decision to go around the castle to the backyard and enter from the rear. Unfortunately, they went around one side only to find that the castle area's perimeter walls had extended into the castle itself to prevent access to the back from the outside. The same was true for the opposite side, and none of the five could jump high enough. Daisy and Neva could not wall jump high enough either; and Daisy's wall cling through Crystal Grip helped very little.

"Well, now what?" said Neva.

"I don't know," said Bowser. "But there's a camera watching us."

The five elemental wielders looked up on the castle at a camera hanging over a window. Its lens was centered on them, and it followed them when they backed away. The group hurried back to the front of the castle, but the camera had already recorded Daisy's and Neva's attempts to scale the walls.

"That is not a good look for us," said Ramona.

"All the more reason to get done quickly here so we can beat it," said Daisy.

The next instant, the front doors cranked their gears and split apart to grant access inside. Not a single person stood on the other side of the doors, and no one spoke through the speakers. Silence pervaded the area once the doors slid all the way open.

"Hey, there's our ticket inside!" Daisy exclaimed.

"Hold on," said Bowser. "Why *now* do the doors open?"

"I dunno – malfunction?" Daisy asked. "Come on! We don't have all night!"

Bowser grimaced as he watched Daisy dart through the doors. "If we end up walking into another trap, I swear..."

The five Kruna trotted through the castle interior a short distance before stopping at the bottom of a winding, railed staircase. Leaning over the railing on the upper floor, Commander Sydney Buinton eyed the Kruna. Her arms crossed, Sydney marched onto a glowing, hovering platform at the top of the stairs and let it glide along the stair railing to deliver her all the way down to the bottom. She smiled at the Kruna upon stepping off of the platform.

"Good evening," said Sydney. "Did you enjoy your trip to Download Desert? Find out everything you needed to know?"

"No, but we found out enough," Daisy spat out.

Sydney's pleasant smile morphed into a fierce smirk. "Wonderful. Are you hungry? Why not join me for dinner? I know I sure am starving."

"Are you gonna feed us food laced with poison?" asked Neva.

"Oh no, I don't need to do that," said Sydney. "At this point, a direct confrontation is the way to go about settling this disturbance you five are causing. I merely asked if you would please join me for dinner. We can hash all this out over a meal."

Daisy raised an eyebrow and glanced at each of her teammates before responding. "Uh...sure."

Sydney clasped her hands together and bowed ever so slightly. "Excellent. Please, follow me."

"I swear, if this is *another trap* ," Bowser grumbled.

Sydney led the five Kruna through the castle, which had no officials present. They passed by an occasional utility robot performing labor duties, but it seemed as though Sydney was the only one there they needed to concern themselves with. That alone made some of the Kruna wonder if Sydney had gathered officials and Patrol Bots for an ambush. That feeling only amplified when Sydney led them past both the dining room and the kitchen to bring them out into the castle's backyard.

The red and gold tints of the evening shaded the massive six-level amphitheater taking up a large portion of the backyard. Thankfully, the Kruna did not see anyone else in the immediate area; not anyone alive, anyways. They saw piles of skeletons and bones scattered around the amphitheater and the amphitheater's stairs and ramps. That was in addition to the bone piles on the porch. The moment Sydney led them into the center of the spacious amphitheater, she stopped and turned to face the Kruna. Aside from Sydney backing a few steps away, nothing else happened.

"What are we out here for?" asked Athelstan. "I thought we were having dinner."

"We are," said Sydney. She proceeded to take off her hat and undo her jacket. Once she tossed those aside, she kicked off her boots and slid out of her pants. Her shirt came off next. Daisy, Bowser, and Neva stared at Sydney in confusion over why the commander had stripped down to her bra and underwear, but Athelstan and Ramona both were practically salivating at the woman's attractive form.

"Okay..." Daisy said. "I get that it's really hot out, but..."

"I see something really hot," said Athelstan.

"Is she go-gonna keep going?" Ramona mumbled.

Daisy and Neva both gave Athelstan and Ramona odd looks. Unlike the Kruna of Stone and Kruna of Light, Bowser stayed tense with unease. He was more concerned with the copious amounts of skeletons and bones in the area than with Sydney's undressing or Athelstan's and Ramona's reactions.

"What are you two ogling her for?!" snapped Daisy. "She tried to get us killed!"

"I don't mind them admiring my perfection," said Sydney. "Truth be told, I've been admiring all of your bodies as well."

Sydney's eyes then turned entirely yellow. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and let her mouth creak open, her teeth morphing into a carnivorous assortment and her tongue elongating. With a long licking of her lips, her expression turned sinister.

"This is another trap, isn't it," muttered Bowser.

Sydney dropped to the ground on her hands and feet, her body morphing and enlarging into a feral, beastly shape nearly twice her original size. The commander's bare skin receded off of her, revealing the muscularity and skeletal structure of a fiendish fox. In contrast to the demonic appearance of her transformation, a pair of angelic wings sprouted off of Sydney's back. Drool leaked from her mouth as she inched closer to the Kruna and got ready to pounce.

"Whoa – alright, never mind what I was thinking!" said Athelstan.

"Energy signature spike!" Neva shouted. "A big one! Couldn't even sense her before!"

"Okay, frightened with all of this now," Ramona said as she and her teammates backed away. "I think I get what she meant in inviting us for dinner."

"Yeah – *we're* not eating anything," said Daisy.

Any further commentary got cut off when Sydney leapt at them. Daisy rolled underneath Sydney while the others scattered to other

areas of the amphitheater. As soon as Sydney turned around, Daisy slammed a foot into the commander's winged fox body. Sydney tumbled along the cobblestone floor a few times but used that momentum to flip to her feet. When Sydney started another slow march, Daisy grasped the handle of her Laser Drill Staff and matched Sydney's advance with steps away at an equal pace. One quick flap of her wings got Daisy to flinch, but Sydney did not do anything extra. That one flinch gave away that Daisy was intending to counter the next jump with a swing from her staff.

Sydney got Daisy to bite on a jumping motion that did not result in a jump, and Daisy pulled out her staff to swing at nothing. Right when Daisy swung, Sydney then leapt at her for real to bite her in a more literal sense. Daisy just barely got out of the way, but Sydney's fangs still clipped her in her right shoulder. Just the taste of the tiniest speck of blood that got on Sydney's tongue was enough to send her into a ravenous frenzy and provoke her into a more aggressive approach for attack. The other Kruna then witnessed Daisy making frantic dodges and evasions from Sydney's swift chain of agile leaps and pounces.

"I bet I could use this cobblestone to knock Sydney away from Daisy," said Athelstan. "But I could easily hit Daisy instead, with how fast they're moving."

"Come on, Daisy!" Ramona shouted. "Do something to counter so Athelstan can give you some breathing room!"

Daisy cut around several more of Sydney's leaps before she got a chance to back flip away. While Daisy was airborne, Sydney lunged at her. The agile Kruna of Earth eased her body out of the way of the bite the monstrous MAE commander made and bashed an elbow into her skull. That stopped Sydney's momentum long enough for Athelstan to pound her with cobblestone when she flopped onto the amphitheater ground. Athelstan's hit thumped Sydney into the air and set up for any one of the other three Kruna to blast her in her helpless state, but she did not stay helpless for long. As soon as Bowser breathed a fireball at Sydney, she twirled and looped with a powerful flap of her wings that got her well out of the fireball's track.

Just when Ramona and Neva tried to get shots of their own off,

Sydney began to soar around the castle backyard. Her speedy flight patterns made it hard for any of the Kruna to target her well enough to initiate an attack. Out of a shuttle loop, she set her sights on Athelstan and zoomed at him with her claws and mouth wide open. Once he saw the winged fox flying straight at him, Athelstan leaned his shoulder shield at Sydney. She ended up hitting and bouncing off of said Metamorphic Shield and again flopped on the ground. That made things easy for Ramona and Neva, and they unleashed a hefty helping of their light and ice from their respective tools to rack up a considerable amount of damage on Sydney. However, their assault got cut short when Sydney curled her wings around her body for defense. Their subsequent blasts of light and ice then dispersed when they hit Sydney's wings.

Sydney took to the air again once Ramona and Neva stopped launching their elementals her way, but she flinched in startled surprise when she noticed the two Reznor skeletons marching at her with the silvery-teal orbs in their empty eye sockets staring straight at her. Daisy had activated her Alkemei Orianthi, Pendant of Reanimation, to establish control over the skeletal beasts. And now, the Kruna of Earth had her hands up and her focus locked on her two undead puppets.

"Hey! That's convenient!" said Athelstan.

"I never liked when she used the Orianthi," mumbled Ramona. "I still don't."

Sydney thought she would stay safe if she kept flapping her wings and maintained her position in the air, but Athelstan decided to give the reanimated Reznor skeletons some aid. Once the Reznor got under Sydney and had nowhere else to go, Athelstan smacked his hammer on the amphitheater ground and raised the sections underneath the triceratops skeletons to raise them to Sydney's height. In a hurry, Sydney flew off to a different area above the castle backyard. Athelstan kept his control over the raised portions of cobblestone and directed them towards Sydney. And when Sydney changed direction and flew elsewhere, Athelstan shifted the floating chunk of ground holding the two Reznor to pursue. The scene soon evolved into a game of tag between the fleeing MAE commander and the two Reznors atop their flying cobblestone

platforms.

"Well, this is one way of going about things," said Ramona.

"It's quite creative – I'll give it that," said Bowser.

Neva fell over on the ground, cracking up with laughter. "This looks so stupid!"

The makeshift game of tag would have gone on for much longer had Daisy not added a pair of Auroros bird skeletons from the piles on the porch into the mix. Sydney now had four large skeletons to deal with; two chasing her down on platforms and two others zipping at her in any which way possible. The MAE commander's smooth and controlled flight soon turned into a haphazard and erratic effort at avoiding getting rammed from the reanimated Auroros, who angled themselves at her from just about any direction they could – and that was in addition to the Reznor skeletons Athelstan still held up and guided.

"Good lord, man!" Ramona screamed. "Seriously, what has this lady – or whatever she is – been eating?!"

"How about 'anything?' " Bowser responded.

"This is so frickin' dumb!" Neva cried, rolling on the ground in laughter.

Sydney soon put one of the Auroros out of commission when the bird tried to ram into her but instead slammed into the castle when she dodged. That reanimated bird skeleton fell to the ground in pieces. Unfortunately for Sydney, the other bird skeleton belted her out of her dodge. Both the undead Auroros and Sydney crashed onto the amphitheater floor near Bowser and Neva. Both of those two Kruna fled from her in a hurry; though, not because of her herself. One of the Reznor skeletons leapt off its floating platform and crashed itself onto Sydney. The other Reznor followed suit seconds later, and Athelstan added the finishing touches by smashing the two platforms he had been controlling into the pileup. With Sydney trapped under the mountain of dismantled, lifeless bones, quiet and stillness returned to the backyard.

"Nice to see that you both have been upping your skills since our fight with Marissa," Bowser said to Daisy and Athelstan.

"For sure," said Ramona. "I've let myself get too rusty. This and the fight with Digga-Leg earlier moved so fast..."

"I gotta admit – it all felt kind of quick for me too," said Neva.

"You have to remember that we're Kruna, and we need to be ready at a moment's notice," said Athelstan. "We all have to stay conditioned. Use it or lose it, right?"

"Right..." Daisy half-heartedly answered. The pile of lifeless, motionless bones covering where Sydney had crashed held her focus. The others noticed her stare and also centered their attention on the same pile, realizing one by one that the fight might not be over just yet.

Sure enough, Sydney erupted from the pile and flew at Daisy with laser-like speed and precision. The winged fox MAE commander snatched Daisy and rocketed up into the air with the Kruna Yura of Earth in her clutches. Once she reached a height she deemed high enough, Sydney wound up her arms and hurled Daisy at the ground below with exceptional force. The velocity Daisy fell with quickly exceeded the point at which any type of landing would be safe. In fact, the inevitable landing would yield fatal results at such wicked speed and acceleration.

Except, something interesting happened that changed everything. Maybe it was because of the way Sydney threw Daisy, or maybe Sydney's claws clipped Daisy's Hammerspace Belt in the process of slinging her down – but whatever the case may have been, the Alkemei Vranzer slid out of the pocket in the belt Daisy had stored it in and into Daisy's grasp. And somehow, Daisy pulled off a miraculous flip upon nearing the ground that had so much torque behind it, it curved a large portion of her momentum sideways and cut her falling speed to that of what would have resulted from a simple, routine jump. To top it all off, Daisy rode the momentum change and landed at the top of the amphitheater seats as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Not a single person there could believe the past twelve seconds of what their vision had caught, particularly the last three seconds from the start of Sydney's throw. Neva could not have been more wide-eyed, and Ramona's mouth could not have hung open any more than it did then and there. Bowser and Athelstan were no less shocked, and even Sydney herself looked from the air upon the earth wielder below her in utter disbelief. Still not aware of what had just happened, Daisy motioned to unlimber her drill staff just to realize that she had her Alkemei Vranzer grasped in her left hand.

"Huh? How did this get out?" Daisy said. She promptly put the pendant back in her belt and got her staff off of her back and into her hands. In the middle of bringing together dirt and soil from the yard behind her onto her staff's drill, she noticed everyone's dumbfounded stares and paused. She then asked, "What are y'all looking at me like that for?"

"How did you just do that?!" Bowser hollered.

"Do what?" Daisy asked.

"You, you-" Bowser stuttered. "Ya- never mind! Look out for Sydney!"

Daisy glanced up and saw Sydney diving at her in an attempt to try and snag her again, but the Kruna of Earth twisted herself out of the way in time to avoid a potential repeat of what had just happened. When Daisy heard the sound of a rifle go off several times in succession, she peered at Neva and saw the ice wielder getting trigger-happy with her Freeze Coil Sniper. Though the first string of Neva's icy bullets struck Sydney, the MAE commander reacted with an alteration of her flight patterns that made all the subsequent shots miss.

"Somebody tell that thing to hold still!" grunted Neva.

Sydney barrel rolled on her way into a corkscrew dive at Neva, forcing the Kruna of Ice to stop shooting and hit the ground to let the winged fox pass by over her. Bowser acted quickly in forcing out a powerful burst of Fireball Flame Breath on Sydney before she could even turn around. The special technique first battered her with its

fireball and then with the trail of continuous flames backing it. Under the constant force of the attack, Sydney tumbled into the side of the castle and got pinned down there while the flames damaged and ate into her skinless form. Her tormented yells made Bowser cut off the technique earlier than he intended, though the other Kruna felt just as squeamish from the noise and sight of the burning winged fox as he did.

"That might have been a little overly done," Ramona whimpered.

"Yeah, no kidding," said Bowser. "I put too much into that one, but I didn't expect her to be so vulnerable to fire in this state."

"That's fine," said Daisy. "We've got her subdued, so she can give us some answers as to what's been going on here."

That is what Daisy had in mind when the Kruna gathered near the castle at the site where the burnt and charred MAE commander lay. However, Sydney did not seem willing to cooperate despite her helpless state. She set up to lash out at Bowser when he neared her, but she held off on it when she saw the other four Kruna aiming their tools at her.

"Just stay where you are, and we won't cause you any more harm," said Daisy. "You need to tell us what's going on with MAE."

"Just what is MAE really?" asked Bowser. "What does MAE stand for, who is behind MAE, and what does MAE ultimately want? What's your endpoint in all of this expansion?"

Sydney snarled and spoke for the first time in her bestial winged fox form. "You're not getting a single answer out of me, filthy savages."

"Now those are some fighting words," said Athelstan. " *Filthy savages?* "

"Barbarians, the whole lot of you!" Sydney barked. "Burn in Hell! Rot in Hell! Anachronistic relics! You're not getting a single bit of information from me but this – your time is at an end! Crazed demons! Nature-bending brutes! *The Order of MAE will bring judgment on all of your kind!* "

"Oh-kay," Neva said. "Fox lady's gone cuckoo."

"We're not leaving until you tell us what we want to hear," said Bowser. "So you better get to talking, or we're gonna be out here all night. Or, we'll just take you back to the Mushroom Kingdom with us; and then you'll have to deal with law enforcement over there. You can count on that. I can't wait to see how you'll explain trying to have us executed under the radar, and hearing the story behind this transformation of yours would be great too-"

Sydney growled and writhed some more before she did something utterly gruesome and unforeseen that the Kruna would never unsee. Her claws at the ready, Sydney took monstrous swipes at *herself* . She targeted her chest and midsection, driven in her relentless slashing and pulling. Piece by piece, chunks of her own flesh and body fell to the ground. Ramona had to look away and cover her ears to protect her psyche from the horrific sight and the awful cries of self-inflicted agony taking place right in front of her.

But Sydney did not stop. She refused to even slow down. At this point, the Kruna could not do anything other than step away and let Sydney rip herself to a gory, nightmare-inducing end. The Kruna knew when it was over once Sydney slowed down and stopped her screaming howls. In a pool of her own bodily fluid, the MAE commander's pieced body stopped moving for the final time.

None of the Kruna knew how to respond to such an action. For a while, they stared at the sight for as long as they could tolerate. The event replayed over in their minds for some time before they each broke away from their collective trance and reestablished awareness of the world around them and their current situation. From what they could tell, they had a colossal problem on their hands.

"Doesn't seem like we're getting any information from her at all, huh?" Athelstan mumbled.

"Naw, ya think?" Neva said.

"Maybe we'll find something in her clothes?" Ramona asked.

Sydney's discarded commander uniform still lay scattered on the

amphitheater grounds. The five Kruna stepped away from Sydney's corpse and approached the abandoned clothing with the hopes of uncovering at least some tidbit of information they could use. Neva knelt and searched through Sydney's jacket and pants to see if she could discover something useful.

"You're going to need to be quick, Neva, so we can get out of here as soon as possible," said Bowser. "We do *not* need to be here when someone catches on to what happened here."

"Whatever Neva finds, I think it's safe to say at this point that MAE is definitely an enemy," said Athelstan. "We'll have to warn as many nations as we can so they'll be ready to fight."

Ramona gasped. "You mean we're going to start a war?"

"No, we don't need to start a full-scale war," said Bowser. "We need to stop MAE before it gets to that point – because if we don't, then it *will* get to that point."

"Either that, or MAE will just take everything over without opposition," said Athelstan.

Daisy wiped at her forehead and smiled. "Alright. Then it sounds like we're in for another crazy adventure!"

"I'd actually rather label it as 'staggering,' " said Ramona. "I mean, just us five against a whole organization we know little about with a global presence?"

"It'll be eight soon, don't you worry," said Daisy. "We'll get Marut, Warra, and Andrew back for sure. We beat Marissa in the future when she had total control over the world, right? We can handle this."

"Yeah, this'll be a cakewalk," said Athelstan. "Today wasn't exactly a cakewalk, but the enemies can't get that much harder, can they?"

"Hey, check this out," Neva said, standing up with Sydney's wallet opened. "This is a wacky ID."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Daisy.

Neva showed the card with a high-definition portrait of Commander Buinton. "It says here next to her face...'Model SMO-001: Symmetric Build... Alias: Sydney Buinton...' Like, what's up with that?"

Daisy felt confused. "Symmetric Build?"

Neva gave the card to Daisy for the group to pass around while she dug through the wallet some more. She pulled out a passport card and examined it for a few moments, but Daisy got impatient with how long Neva was taking to read.

"What's it say?" asked Daisy.

"Hold on!" Neva snapped, fiddling with the card. "I'm far-sighted! Give me a second, I'm trying to..."

Daisy swiped the card away from Neva and looked over it herself. It was a passport card for Isle Delfino with a large MAE emblem preceding the locale's name and "MAE Province" inscribed underneath. She then gasped when she remembered the Patrol Bot from earlier in Download Desert identifying Warra's last known location as Isle Delfino.

Chapter X

Sunny Sky Blue – Delfino Plaza Defense?:

The Kruna Yura returned to Mushroom Kingdom for the night to sleep, but they were back out and flying west on course for Isle Delfino early the next morning. As they neared the island out in the Pyrimies Ocean, the Kruna saw confirmation of their suspicions and what Commander Buinton's passport card had said. MAE controlled Isle Delfino; and though approximately half of the island had evaded the magical mechanical touch of MAE innovation and advancement, the organization had done more than enough renovation for the Kruna to notice from their Bullet Blitzer. Delfino Plaza had experienced the most mass technological overhaul out of all of the island's locations, making for a stark contrast with the island's non-mechanized areas.

Bowser veered the Bullet Bill-shaped copter to the north side of Isle Delfino and flew towards Corona Mountain, one of the areas on the island left untouched to this point. The fairly remote region made for a decent spot to park the Bullet Blitzer, out of sight from the public eye. Once Bowser picked out a plateau near the base of the volcano to park, the Kruna set out along the grassy fields south to Delfino Plaza, the likely capital for MAE Isle Delfino and a place where they hoped to either run into Warra – however doubtful Athelstan and Bowser seemed about that outcome – or get some answers on MAE as a whole.

"If nothing else results from this, we at least need to figure out where MAE's headquarters is," Bowser said as they stepped onto a dirt road in the open field. "If we can find out where their main base of operations is and take down whoever their leaders are, we can destroy MAE from the inside-out. As things are right now, that'll be the best way to handle this. Quick and efficient and with minimal involvement from the public. Proactive, rather than reactive."

"Yeah, and we do have a responsibility to help keep things in this world stable," said Daisy.

"I wonder if the future Marissa ever had to deal with MAE in her timeline," said Ramona.

"I'm pretty sure she must have had to," said Bowser. "But I could easily imagine Marissa and her archfiends annihilating anything that had to do with MAE without question. And I could also see no one of the Comet Observatory or Rainbow City even knowing of it until after the fact, that because of the then Nirvana Barrier's status over Earth preventing them from watching anything without them going under the barrier themselves."

"Who knows – maybe that Dark Sentinel robot that was chasing us was actually stolen from MAE," said Athelstan.

"Yeah, why not," said Neva. "Scratch that three-letter emblem with wings off the machine and screw with its tech, and then you've got a bootleg killer robot you didn't even have to build."

Ramona smiled. "That's something I would've expected Andrew to say."

"I gotta fill in for that smart-ass idiot since he's not here," said Neva.

"I hear ya," said Athelstan. "It's not the same without his witty and cheeky commentary. Of course, I've got witty commentary too."

"You're cornier than corn," said Bowser. "Not the same."

"But equally as needed, I'd say," added Daisy. "And the one thing that really sucks about this MAE issue is that there's other stuff that we need to be doing; namely, figuring out where Warra and Andrew are, for one. Then we also have to remember that Kokoro still has the Ankh. And I also have to figure out how the Vranzer works."

"You mean you still have no idea how to use that thing?" asked Neva.

"Nope," Daisy said. "Nor have I figured out what it actually does."

"Why don't you put the Vranzer on now?" said Athelstan. "If it yields an automatic effect, you won't know what it does unless you keep it on and let it react to whatever it needs to react to."

"But as things are now, the Orianthi is more useful," said Daisy. "Whenever I've tried to use the Vranzer, it's been unresponsive. I could still need to use the Orianthi."

"Then give the Orianthi to Ramona," said Athelstan. "Her Alkemei's pretty useless right now."

"Woah – no no no no no!" Ramona shrieked. "I am not using that one! Daisy, you go ahead and keep that! Arka Knight gave that to you, not me!"

"Well, at least wear the Vranzer for a while, Daisy," said Athelstan. "If it doesn't seem to help much, then switch back to the Orianthi."

"It has to help in some way," said Daisy. "I didn't go through what I did to get this just to end up with a dud pendant."

"Then put it on and figure out what it does," said Bowser. "If we really need the Orianthi, then pull it out and equip it when it's needed. But as it stands now, the Vranzer is a dud and will stay useless unless you can figure it out. So put it on and leave it on for more than five minutes and figure it out."

Daisy sighed. "You guys are right. I really should give more of a chance to let it work..."

Once Daisy swapped out her Orianthi for the Vranzer, she put the now dulled Orianthi away into her Hammerspace Belt. The Vranzer's gem became saturated with a glossy black once attached to Daisy's neck, though it did nothing when Daisy tried to will it to activate. But in spite of the disconcerted feeling that ran through her, she committed to keeping it on. As time passed, she could feel a sense of reassurance developing over wearing the special Alkemei.

The Kruna soon entered the outer borders of *not* Delfino Plaza, but Delfino Square instead. They had to pass through the smaller seaport and market area known as Delfino Square first before they could get to Delfino Plaza. Despite not being as large, Delfino Square demonstrated extensive amounts of the same technological innovation and advancement the Kruna saw in MAE Beanbean Kingdom – albeit, with a heavier industrial emphasis there. The rural

countryside region to the north in comparison to the factory and power plant dominant urban area to the south represented a contrast akin to that of day and night.

"This island must serve as some source of production for MAE equipment," said Athelstan.

"I'm thinking this is just more of a seaport," said Bowser. "But it could also be an offshore manufacturing locale."

As the Kruna progressed along Delfino Square's bolted streets, they noticed an absence of citizens and non-MAE personnel in the area. In fact, all the people and robots in the area seemed to be workers. Considering Delfino Square's scant security presence, the Kruna did not feel any immediate threat. In the back of their minds however, they wondered how many of the MAE workers they passed watched them. Bowser also wondered if MAE had somehow witnessed their fight against Commander Buinton, which would likely mark them as hostile to every MAE-controlled province and territory. The lack of aggression demonstrated so far in Delfino Square boded well for them in that respect. They passed through Delfino Square with minimal issue.

But then the time came when the Kruna exited Delfino Square's main sector and arrived at its southwestern outer edge. The short stretch of grass and trees harbored one end of a long, wide bridge over a bay. Delfino Plaza existed at the other end of the bridge, but a conspicuously strange feature hung over the top of the entryway.

The Kruna noticed the object in better detail when they neared the bridge entrance. It was a high-tech piece of equipment that grappled the tall first row of bridge support tower posts with six-fingered hands coming out of segmented, ball-constructed arms. Its spiked arms connected at two points of its flattened and curved hexagonal body, and feather-textured anti-gravity cylinders stuck out of the sockets of the other four points. At the center of its body, a large, four-point gold star and a smaller and diagonal four-point blue star encircled an opaque dome. Altogether, the compact white and gray machine measured equal in size to Bowser's shell.

"What do you guys think that is?" Daisy asked.

In an instant, the dome of the suspended machine opened up to uncover a bulbous, life-like eye with a red iris. The Kruna froze in their tracks the moment the machine's eye revealed itself. When the machine centered its eye's sight on them and released itself from the bridge to float towards them, they had a feeling the peaceful, pleasant sunny day was about to turn violent.

"UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL NOT PERMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT," the machine projected. Its speech sounded organic, but its tone was harshly metallic and synthesized.

"I was *going* to say that it was some weird decoration," muttered Neva.

"Not permitted?" Daisy said. "Too bad. We need to get into Delfino Plaza there-"

"UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL NOT PERMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT," the machine repeated. "TURN BACK AND DEPART, OR FACE CAPITAL PUNISHMENT THROUGH MAE DEFENSE SYSTEM."

"MAE Defense System?" said Ramona.

"I'm gonna take a wild guess here," said Bowser. "You're the defense system, aren't you?"

"YES," said MAE Defense System. "I AM THE DEFENSE SYSTEM UNIT ASSIGNED TO DELFINO PLAZA. FINAL WARNING TO SUSPICIOUS GROUP: LEAVE, OR PERISH ON THE SPOT."

"Wow, not giving us much of a choice there with that ultimatum," said Daisy.

"UNIVERSAL DATABASE ONLINE AND ACCESSIBLE," said MAE Defense System. Its arms, stars, and anti-gravity cylinders all amplified their glow.

"Oh boy – here we go!" Ramona said.

The Kruna had little time to prepare themselves before MAE Defense System went on the offensive, though not because the

machine attacked. Its eye glowed, and the stars surrounding its eye entered a rapid, blurring rotation as a wave of gold light beamed out of its pupil onto the ground in front of the Kruna. A golden hologram of a large, humanoid mouse with sunglasses, gloves, and boots formed out of the light. Once the holographic being appeared, MAE Defense System flew high overhead and out of reach of the Kruna.

"HOLO MOUSER LOADED," said MAE Defense System.

Athelstan stifled a laugh. "Are they serious? Holograms? How are they supposed to do anything with holograms-"

The Kruna of Stone flopped onto the ground after a holographic baseball bat hit him in his head. After a few bounces on the pavement, the thrown bat dissipated. Holo Mouser took out another bat and chucked it at Daisy, but she sidestepped in time to avoid taking a hit from the erratically spinning object.

"Tangible holograms?" Athelstan groaned, clutching his face.

"Oh, they're doing that holographic meatloaf bit, aren't they?" said Ramona.

Bowser gave Ramona a weird look. "What's that from?"

Holo Mouser took out another bat and rushed at Neva, this time intent on using the bat as a melee weapon. Out of panic, Neva threw up her hands and shrieked. When Holo Mouser struck, he struck hard – much harder than anyone thought he would. Neva flew off the asphalt and into a helpless tumble in the grass, stunned and dazed.

"It's too nice of a day for this," said Ramona.

"Seriously, what is MAE?!" said Daisy.

Holo Mouser pulled out a *lit holographic bomb* and tossed it at the group of four Kruna, who backpedaled the moment they saw him wind up to throw it. An actual explosion occurred that left behind scorch marks on the street once the bomb contacted it. Two more bombs flew at the Kruna and further scattered them in evasion.

"Hey, Athelstan," said Daisy. "Don't let one of *those* hit ya!"

"Yeah, I don't think that's a good idea," said Athelstan.

"It's too bad this defense system chose such a joke of a fighter to make a hologram out of," said Bowser. He breathed out a fireball to clash with the next bomb Holo Mouser threw, causing a midair explosion. Ramona pulsed out a shot of light from her Solar Greatsword through the explosion and scored a hit on their holographic enemy. Daisy then dashed at Holo Mouser and laid down a feisty combo of punches, kicks, and elbows on him.

Holo Mouser's form fizzled and glitched some when he fell, but he got up before long and pulled out another bomb. Neva recovered in time to see Daisy back flip away just as Holo Mouser set up to hurl his bomb. With a quick draw of her Freeze Coil Sniper, Neva got off an ice bullet on Holo Mouser that rocked him enough for him to drop his bomb. The volatile bomb exploded upon hitting the asphalt in front of Holo Mouser, and the blast decimated him into nothingness.

"Awesome shot, Neva!" Daisy cheered.

"See? He sucked," said Bowser. "Already gone."

MAE Defense System flew back into close proximity and zoomed throughout the area before setting up to create another holographic being. This time, a giant holographic Whomp took shape from MAE Defense System's eye beam. The machine again zipped away to let its artificial creation do battle.

"HOLO WHOMP KING, ATTACK!" MAE Defense System shouted.

"And here's another guy that sucks," said Bowser.

As fast as he could, Holo Whomp King revved his stubby legs up into a sprint and leapt at Bowser and Athelstan. He had intended to smash himself down on the two Kruna, but he did not expect Athelstan to catch him and raise him overhead. Tapping into his Alkemei Odina, Athelstan threw Holo Whomp King with double-strength force. The huge Whomp hologram crashed into a tree and knocked it over, almost sailing into the bay in the process.

"Aw man, he would've gone for a swim if that tree weren't in the way," said Athelstan.

"Hey, I remember this guy!" said Daisy. "How did that defense system create a hologram of him?"

Holo Whomp King pushed himself off of the ground and rocked to his feet, glitching out much like Holo Mouser did. He charged at Daisy and Ramona this time and lunged at them in much the same way he had dove at Bowser and Athelstan. Daisy and Ramona both split to dodge in opposite directions and let Holo Whomp King drop onto the ground. Athelstan ran over with his Mountain Hammer out and brought it down on Holo Whomp King's cracked back with his Odina still active. The monstrous hit utterly demolished Holo Whomp King into crumbled pieces that proceeded to evaporate without any trace left behind.

"Oof – I felt that," mumbled Ramona.

"So it seems as though these holograms will break apart if they get hit enough times," said Athelstan. "They must become unstable if they take too much damage."

"Nice security force," said Bowser.

Neva had her sniper up and ready to shoot when MAE Defense System flew back around. She fired the moment MAE Defense System slowed to a still hover, only for the machine to project a light shield in anticipation of the attack attempt and block the two incoming ice shots. MAE then used its abilities to create four separate but identical holograms directed at Neva of big-headed triceratops.

"HOLO REZNORS ENGAGED," MAE Defense System said as it flew out of reach once more.

The four Holo Reznors stampeded at Neva with their horns aimed at her. With how close MAE Defense System had spawned them, they moved much too fast for Neva to get out of the way of. Perhaps even more surprising, Daisy somehow, with as far away as she was, reached and cut through the Holo Reznors to snatch Neva and jump

over the attackers.

Neva gasped when Daisy landed, clutching to the earth wielder as if hanging over the edge of a skyscraper. Her senses had blurred in the two seconds that passed between the Holo Reznors charging at her and Daisy getting her to safety. Daisy was not even in Nova Form, yet she had moved so swiftly and stupefied Neva with her speedy reaction and movement.

"Wha-what just happened?" Neva mumbled, wide-eyed.

"I just saved you from a bunch of holograms; that's what!" Daisy replied.

"Um...uh," Neva sputtered out. "I don't...I don't know what to do with my hands..."

"You can start by letting go of me," said Daisy.

Neva seemed shaky when Daisy set her down to stand on her own. Though not as much as Neva, the other Kruna also showed some surprise. They knew Daisy was fast, but the way she had just moved demonstrated ridiculous amounts of speed and agility both.

"She sure hasn't been slacking since Marissa, huh?" said Athelstan.

"It took Nova Form for her to be able to move that fast before..." Bowser murmured.

"Oh dear, I really fell behind if she's able to do all that now," mumbled Ramona.

"Maybe we all did," Athelstan said. "That's insanity right there."

By the time Neva started sobering, the Holo Reznors had turned around to charge at her and Daisy again. Neva got away without Daisy's aid this time, and Daisy did not evade the Holo Reznors with the same quickness she had exhibited moments ago. Bowser and Ramona aimed their respective tools at the Holo Reznors, but the holograms demonstrated some agility of their own in turning and leaping over the blasts the two Kruna sent at them.

With their sights on Bowser and Ramona now, the Holo Reznors dashed at them with their mouths open. As they ran, they released burst after burst of fire in front of them for a combo attack of fireballs and tackling. Ramona got her Sun Shield up and ducked under it, but Bowser snagged her and ran to the side.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Ramona asked.

"You would've blocked their fire, but you still would've gotten trampled!" Bowser snapped.

The Holo Reznors curved their run and their aim at Bowser and Ramona as the Kruna of Fire continued to pull his light teammate around to their left. Some of the Holo Reznor fireballs blasted away a few of the limited amount of trees in the area, but MAE Defense System did not seem at all concerned with the collateral damage. Almost a full circle of burned, charred ground stained the asphalt and grass before the Holo Reznors stopped their pursuit.

Daisy pulled out her Laser Drill Staff the moment she noticed the Holo Reznors had stopped near the edge of the grass by the bay. Before the Holo Reznors could move again, she focused her elemental powers through her staff and raised the chunk of earthen land into a slope. As Daisy increased the incline of the ground the Holo Reznors stood on, they each lost their footing one by one and rolled off the edge into the bay water. Though they could not see the Holo Reznors after they fell into the bay, the Kruna could hear each Holo Reznor's splash and subsequent disbandment.

"Oh, nice!" Neva said as Daisy replaced the ground she had worked.

"Hey, come on!" Athelstan cried. "I was about to smack 'em with one of those trees!"

MAE Defense System's eye had an angry look to it when the machine reappeared to create another hologram. The hologram of a vicious dog-wolf hybrid that dropped out of the air became instantly recognizable for each of the Kruna, for they had to deal with copious amounts of such enemies when fighting against Marissa in Sarasaland. Wonder over how MAE Defense System created its holographic enemies reached its apex when the large, demonic

canine growled at them.

"HOLO HELLHOUND, POUNCE!" MAE Defense System commanded.

"Man, nobody wanted to see one of those things again!" Neva grumbled.

Holo Hellhound crept towards Daisy and Neva, the closest of the five Kruna considering Bowser and Ramona were on the other end of the small field and Athelstan stayed centered on the road. Neva tried to get a shot off on MAE Defense System, but it again flew off to a point away from the main battle area and out of range. The sound of her rifle set Holo Hellhound off, and the holographic demon dog jumped at Neva. With amazing reflexes, Daisy slammed an uppercut into Holo Hellhound right before it could lash at Neva. Surprise once more filled Neva, for Daisy could not have timed that punch better.

Holo Hellhound flipped and landed on its feet with a growl, ready to strike again. However, it had to make an evasive jump before it could attack so that it could clear itself out of the way of the tree Athelstan threw at it. Now, Holo Hellhound had its sights on the Kruna of Stone. It took off with angered haste powering its legs, but Neva caught it in its left hind leg with a shot from her rifle. With its leg now partially frozen, Holo Hellhound slowed down enough for Athelstan to bring up some of the road in front of him and let the hologram ram into that instead. Ramona and Bowser advanced and blitzed Holo Hellhound with their light and fire while it sat there stunned. Athelstan's quick jolt of the raised asphalt then shoved Holo Hellhound away and closer to Neva, who ran at the holographic dog and jammed her Chill Sickle into it. After crying out in a howl of pain, Holo Hellhound broke apart and disintegrated.

MAE Defense System zipped back into the immediate area near Daisy and Neva, still mad and now glowing again. Its eye generated light, but it gathered in a pulsating, oozing blue orb rather than to create another hologram. With the way it aimed its eye, Daisy and Neva could tell that MAE Defense System was targeting them for a likely attack. They dashed under the machine and across the street right as it released its wavy energy beam, but they had to keep

moving when MAE Defense System traced its aim their way.

"Doesn't look like it's up for using those holograms anymore," said Athelstan.

"One of y'all, do something!" Neva yelled as she and Daisy ran. "I'm not getting hit by an eye cannon! Like, that's just not happening!"

Bowser flared and slung a fireball off of one of his Blazer Claws with a curve to its flight. The projectile angled into MAE Defense System and hit it in its MAE-emblem on its back, disrupting its cannon attack. Minimal time passed before MAE Defense System turned around and flew at Bowser, its arms and open hands now vibrating with free-flowing electricity. As it flew, it spread its arms out in opposing curves and entered a furious full-body rotation that made it resemble a spinning top.

"Are you frickin' kidding me?!" Bowser grunted as he dodged through a hard skid in his shell.

MAE Defense System bounced off the ground where Bowser formerly stood and reentered the air, its rotation wobbling from the hit but gaining speed. It launched itself at Bowser again, provoking the Kruna of Fire into another dodge. However, it turned out to be a fake attack. Before Bowser even made the evasive move, MAE Defense System whipped its flight around and swooshed through the air at Ramona. Barely prepared, Ramona spun just out of MAE Defense System's reach and felt the gust of its rotational speed and its electric charge swipe at her hair as it flew by.

"Brilliant bloody hell – stop this crazy thing!" Ramona screamed, breaking into a sprint.

"Got it!" Daisy called out, a fist charged with seismic power. With MAE Defense System curving into a chase at Ramona, Daisy ran at her light teammate and crossed paths with her to intercept the pursuing machine. Not too far behind Daisy, Neva had an attack of her own on standby for her approach. The Kruna of Earth nullified MAE Defense System's electricity and shook up its rotation when she forced out the seismic rumble of her Shotgun blast.

Having been given enough time to ready her advanced elemental ability, Neva then unleashed the latent magnetism within the ice she had generated around her sickle and directed the power at MAE Defense System. Now bound in place, the machine struggled to break from Neva's magnetic hold. Daisy moved aside to clear the way for Athelstan, who trotted at the machine with his hammer up and his Odina active one more time. At that point, MAE Defense System could not do anything to protect itself. With Neva holding it in place and disrupting its electronics, Athelstan smashed his hammer into MAE Defense System using enough strength to obliterate the machine into hundreds of pieces in much the same way he had finished off Digga-Leg.

"Bro, you are too strong," Daisy said among the clanks and pitter-patter of falling metal.

Athelstan grinned and flipped his tool a couple of times in his hands. "I'm liking this hammer and Alkemei combo."

"I bet you are," said Neva.

"I want to know what was up with that robot and what was up with those holograms it was making," said Bowser. "Tangible holograms at that. But maybe even more than that – Mouser? Whomp King? Reznors?"

"And then a hellhound to top it all off," said Ramona. "And it howled out in pain when Neva stabbed it."

Bowser grimaced. "Just how are they doing all of this?"

Athelstan was the only one with a response. "Technology – am I right?"

Chapter XI

Infiltrating MAE Delfino Plaza:

The five Kruna stormed through MAE-controlled Delfino Plaza and wrecked just about every Patrol Bot and security machine they came across. MAE Defense System's destruction had elicited an aggressive response from MAE's automated law enforcement units, likely transmitted through some wireless means. That made it so that the Kruna had to fight Patrol Bots and MAE officials operating fighting mechs the moment the group crossed over the bridge and entered Delfino Plaza territory. It did not take long for chaos to ensue, for stun shots and electronic explosives came at the Kruna from nearly every possible direction.

It seemed as though every time the Kruna thought they had quelled the immediate threats in the vicinity, they dashed around a corner or past an intersection to dig deeper into Delfino Plaza and ran into another grouping of officials and robots. Luckily, the security forces were more like droves of mooks than full-fledged opponents. That made carving through each batch of them simple and swift. For every electronic and man-made weapon or attack MAE threw out – stun gun, electric bomb, shock clubs, extending grapples, or swarming tactics powered through anti-gravity – the Kruna met and countered them with pure elemental force. Because of the constant pressure from MAE, the Kruna did not have much of a chance to try looking for Warra.

After tearing through another sector of the mechanized and barely recognizable Delfino Plaza, the Kruna entered the district's seaside Bianco Square. The pedestal in the center that used to hold the Grand Pianta Statue now held a tall pole from which several spotlights angled their daytime-visible beams all over the area. Just seconds later, more MAE robots and personnel-driven humanoid and animal mechs flooded into the square.

"There's no shortage of these guys here, is there?" Bowser said, erecting an aura of fire around him.

With a quick, light-gathering twirl of her Solar Greatsword, Ramona fed a large faction of her elemental powers into Bowser's aura. The Kruna of Fire then flared the melded flames and light around him to shroud himself in a rainbow inferno. Boosted with the immense power-up, Rainbow Bowser spun into a rapid Whirling Fortress that bounced all over the area and blasted apart mechs and robots with ease. Try as they might, the MAE forces could not keep up with Rainbow Bowser's enhanced speed long enough for them to target and fire shots at him. Daisy, Athelstan, and Neva did their part and mangled the enemies Rainbow Bowser did not veer near. In less than a minute, a squadron of dozens had been reduced to a mess of mechanical scraps and fleeing MAE officials.

"Commander! We need your help!" one of the officials called into his watch. "These elemental wielders are crazy! They've decimated our entire unit!"

Rainbow Bowser's power-up wore off after the conflict had stopped, and the Kruna regrouped around the spotlight at the center of Bianco Square. What few guards remained that had not fled already now took the opportunity to do so. Despite the area now calming, the Kruna had a feeling they

were not done with the violence yet just based off of the one official's distress call.

"We're probably facing another one of those MAE commanders soon," said Bowser. "How soon, I don't know."

"Probably soon enough if this is where the town hall is," said Daisy.

"Does this stupid pendant not work against technology or something?" Neva whined in reference to her Alkemei Hien. "I couldn't copy any of their crap!"

"It probably can't," said Athelstan. "If it can, MAE's just might be too advanced."

"These pendants were made, like, thousands of years ago," said Ramona.

"Alright, that guy called for a commander, so where's the commander?" said Daisy.

The group's talking subsided into a suspenseful silence. Following a short wait, the doors to the town hall building behind the tall spotlights swung open. A bulky Kritter comparable in size to Bowser and Athelstan marched out with two Patrol Bots flanking him. In addition to the commander uniform that bore a similar appearance to that of Commander Sydney Buinton's, he had a sack strapped across his hips and had what appeared to be an anti-gravity hover pack on his back that used the same technology found in the tires of MAE's anti-gravity vehicles and in MAE Defense System.

"Welcome," the Kritter MAE commander said. Ironically, he spoke with a thick country drawl. "Have you hyenas had your fun wrecking the place yet? You're not taking MAE seriously, you know."

"We don't know, so it's hard to take you seriously," said Daisy.

"You folks look quite familiar," said the commander. "Oh, that's right. We just received intel here of an assassination of Commander Buinton." He paused and grinned. "Am I correct in saying y'all barbarian morons are the culprits?"

"What? No!" snapped Neva. "She killed herself!"

"Oh yeah?" said the commander. "That's not what the rest of MAE needs to know, now is it?"

Neva growled and took aim with her rifle, sniping ice bullets into both Patrol Bots beside the commander. The MAE Commander did not move, but he frowned once the Patrol Bots fell to the ground.

"This is why you elemental wielders need to die," the commander said. "All you want to do is destroy. We as a society need to build up, but all you little nature devils want to do is fight and kill and wreck everything."

"No way is any of that true!" Daisy yelled.

"Between Commander Buinton and what you've done so far here on MAE Isle Delfino, I beg to differ," the commander said, powering up

his hover pack. "Y'all have no business here, but you decided to stick your noses where they don't belong. Well, fine. This is just more incentive to rid the world of you pests that much sooner. And once I relay the report over what you've done here too? Oh, your kind will face judgment!"

The commander left the ground and entered the air above Bianco Square, pulling out rectangular devices from his sack. "But not before you personally experience Commander Malakai-certified justice!"

Flying around the Kruna with the aid of his hover pack, Commander Malakai threw the six rectangular devices he had in his hands from several different directions. Though none of them hit any of the Kruna, the devices stuck to the ground on first contact without bouncing and lit up with a pink glow. Commander Malakai then pulled out a grenade from his sack and lobbed it at Daisy, who caught it and then threw it out into the ocean once she realized what it was. The moment the grenade touched the water, an electrically charged explosion zapped the ocean for as far as the Kruna could see.

"Electric grenades," Bowser grumbled.

"Here ya go!" Commander Malakai boomed. He tossed another grenade, this one thrown at Ramona's feet. In a panic, Ramona backpedaled and turned to run away. The other Kruna ran as well, for too much time had passed for them to do anything else. They all avoided the grenade explosion, but Athelstan and Ramona each got too close to the sticky devices Commander Malakai had thrown out earlier. The two Kruna triggered the devices, which gave off shock explosions that electrocuted them and left them both stunned in paralysis. Upon seeing this, Bowser hurled fireballs at the other four remaining sticky bombs to detonate them before anyone else set them off.

"Excellent," Commander Malakai said, pulling out a launcher of some kind. As he drifted away from more ice Neva shot at him, a high-voltage orb gathered in his launcher's spout. He directed the aim of his weapon at Athelstan and fired it, but Daisy jumped in front of Athelstan and let her drill staff bear the brunt of the electric

spheroid. Some of the shock traveled down through the staff and into Daisy, which made her recovery out of her dive haphazard and sloppy.

Athelstan and Ramona still had yet to regain feeling in their bodies, which Commander Malakai again tried to take advantage of. This time however, Bowser got in front of Athelstan and let loose flame breath to clash with the electric burst the MAE Commander had shot. Neva sniped Commander Malakai in his left shoulder before he could ready his launcher again and knocked the weapon out of his grasp. The Kruna of Ice shot more of her elemental bullets at the commander, but he made sure to stay on the move in the air so that he could avoid her rounds.

While Commander Malakai evaded Neva, Athelstan and Ramona finally got back enough control over their bodies to at least stand up. Neva's offensive got cut short when Commander Malakai threw out an electric Bob-omb at her. The contact explosive detonated the moment it hit the ground near Neva, which gave her very little time to react. As a result, she succumbed to a painful, damaging stun shock that brought her down and left her vulnerable.

Commander Malakai made a move to retrieve his launcher weapon, only to see Daisy kick it into the ocean. "HEY!" he screamed. "Don't you realize how much that cost to make?!"

Daisy shrugged. "Not really."

With a grumbling growl, Commander Malakai took out another electric Bob-omb and tossed it at Daisy. She had an easy time getting herself clear of the explosive and its blast radius when it blew, but she almost ran off the square's edge and dropped into the ocean herself. When she glanced back at Commander Malakai, she saw another Shock Bob-omb fly at her from a different angle. Somehow, she slipped when she tried to cut inside and nearly rolled off another edge of Bianco Square. That mistake earned her a paralyzing, painful zap from the Bob-omb's blast radius when it hit the ground. Before Commander Malakai could follow up with anything else, a blast of light struck him out of the air and knocked him into a tumble on the ground that almost put him into the water.

"That wasn't nice!" Ramona yelled at the MAE commander. Her raised, glowing sword and her stance indicated that the paralysis on her had fully worn off. "You made me think I wasn't going to walk again!"

Also rejuvenated, Athelstan smirked and held up his Mountain Hammer. "Give me a light, Bowser."

Bowser breathed fire on the head of the Kruna of Stone's metal tool and set it ablaze. As soon as Commander Malakai got up, he saw Athelstan nearing him with a flaming hammer. The commander jumped to reenter the air, but Athelstan smacked him in his back and sent him hurtling into the side of the town hall building. The hammer hit in addition to the slam against the building trashed Commander Malakai's hover pack, which he promptly took off once he got to his feet and realized it no longer worked when he failed to lift off the ground.

Athelstan spun his blazing Mountain Hammer as he marched towards Commander Malakai. With a disgruntled chuckle, the MAE commander straightened his posture and dug his hands into his sack. Though he slowed his pace, Athelstan kept advancing.

Neva managed to force herself up to her knees just as Athelstan closed in on Commander Malakai. "A flaming hammer... That's beyond badass."

"I didn't want to have to use *this* ," said Commander Malakai. In one swift motion, he pulled out a cylindrical apparatus resembling a large pill. The object hovered over his hand before splitting down the middle and extending to reveal a dense green plasma core.

Athelstan immediately reversed his momentum. "What's that thing supposed to be?"

"You better hope I'm careful with this," the commander replied, now stepping towards Athelstan. "This has enough power to level this whole sector of MAE Delfino Plaza. *At least* ."

Athelstan whipped the fire off of his hammer and put it away across his back, his focus now on his own movement. Bowser, Ramona,

and Daisy also started backing up when Athelstan neared them. Neva got to moving around too once more feeling returned to her body, though everyone else was at the other side of Bianco Square.

"Nobody try anything funny," said Commander Malakai. "Otherwise, we'll *all* get blown into the afterlife."

"Is that a bomb?" asked Ramona.

"No, it's a toaster," said Commander Malakai.

"How about you stop walking towards us with that, buddy?" asked Athelstan.

"I wouldn't have to if y'all didn't keep walking away," said Commander Malakai.

"You'd really try and kill yourself just to kill us?" Bowser asked.

"Hell no!" the commander replied. "I'm just trying to do you lot in! I will do what I have to do, but you better not do anything to take me with you! *This* is just meant for you!"

"Wait, hold on – everybody, stop moving!" Daisy demanded.

Bowser, Athelstan, and Ramona stopped right behind Daisy, and Commander Malakai continued to approach them. Daisy then advanced towards the commander, which got *him* to stop as well. Strangely, Commander Malakai backed away; and Daisy kept trying to move closer to him, instead of the other way around.

"Hey, what are you doing?" said Commander Malakai. "You're getting too close!"

"Oh, now you don't want us to be close?" said Daisy, inching nearer. "C'mon. Throw it. I'm right here. Easy target."

"No, no – I don't want an easy target!" the commander barked. "Back up, Jack!"

"You're not gonna throw it," said Daisy. "You know you'll get taken out too! You're just trying to intimidate us!"

"Hey, yeah!" snapped Ramona. "What are you trying to scare us like that for?"

"To get ya to give up!" yelled Commander Malakai. "And if y'all don't give up, I *will* use this! Whether or not I get caught in the explosion, y'all aren't leaving here alive either way!"

Daisy frowned and took another step towards Commander Malakai, prompting him to raise the plasma explosive up in preparation to throw it. He now advanced at Daisy, and she stepped back. Seemingly, Commander Malakai had regained control of the situation.

"Uh-huh – who's the one bluffing now?" said the MAE commander. "I'll gladly wipe us all out if it means avenging Commander Buinton and exterminating you demons!"

"Man, I'm real sorry about that," said Daisy. "She must have meant a lot to you, so I can get being mad over her death. But what I don't get is your vendetta against elemental wielding. All you've done is act like we're a bunch of villainous criminals."

"Because that's what you are!" Commander Malakai roared. "I've had enough experience with your kind to know how alike each and every single one of you are! Banishing elemental wielding will be the best thing that will come about in the MAE-led future! And I will play my part in MAE's era of enlightenment, elemental scum!"

Daisy felt her chest implode with pressure when she saw Commander Malakai pull back to throw his explosive. But amazingly, the plasma powering the device fizzled out. Commander Malakai let his raised arm drift through the throwing motion without throwing the dead explosive, confused and lost. He stared at it in wonder over how it could have malfunctioned, but then he heard Bowser laugh. In only paying attention to Daisy, he did not notice Bowser focusing his flame influence through his Flare Sword to tamper with the plasma core of the explosive from a distance. The Kruna of Fire had just enough time to tap into his plasma manipulation ability and disband the explosive's plasma.

Gritting his teeth, Commander Malakai proceeded to sling the dead

device anyways. It hit the ground in front of Daisy, but it did not do anything but break and leak some chemical odor. Neva walked over to stand next to Daisy, pointing at the shattered explosive and laughing. Her teammate's laughter made Daisy smile, but both came to an abrupt halt when Commander Malakai, with an otherwise nonchalant expression nonetheless, pulled out another one of the same plasma devices.

"Damn it," Daisy murmured.

Neva sighed. "Oh, screw me."

"Okay, here's what's going to happen," Commander Malakai said. He did not add anything to his speech. Instead, he turned and sprinted to one side of the town hall building.

"Hey! Get back here!" yelled Daisy.

The moment Daisy ran after Commander Malakai, he turned around and pulled back an arm to throw the explosive. "Don't you try to follow me!"

Daisy hit the brakes in her run and came to a skidding stop. Commander Malakai made sure none of the Kruna tried to get closer before he lowered his plasma explosive and continued running. He soon disappeared behind a corner of the town hall building, leaving the Kruna all alone.

"Stay alert in case he tries to lob that thing over the building," said Bowser.

"We're going to have to chase him at some point," said Daisy.

"But we have to be extra careful because of that plasma thing he's got," said Ramona.

"I bet he wants us to go after him," said Neva. "That'd make it easy for him to ambush us and blow us up."

"We just have to hit him before he can throw it at us," said Daisy.

"But it'll detonate if he drops it, and we'll likely be pretty close to

him," said Athelstan. "And if he sees one of us attacking, he'll probably just throw it at us."

"Then what do we do?" asked Ramona.

No one had an answer. They had a risky predicament on their hands, but their time to do anything about it ran out quicker than expected. Just a few moments later, Commander Malakai flew overhead in an armored, hovering kart.

"Y'all are about to have ALL of MAE on your tail, ya hear?" Commander Malakai yelled down. He then hit the accelerator and drove his hover kart offshore and out into the skies above the ocean. At that point, the Kruna then knew what they had to do.

"We need to get to the Bullet Blitzer and chase that guy down!" Daisy yelled. She broke out into a sprint back through the way the Kruna had come from. The others followed her lead, taking special note of the direction Commander Malakai had flown in so that they could pursue him.

Chapter XII

Danger Ahead at Sunset Hill:

The Kruna pursued Commander Malakai's hovering kart in their Bullet Blitzer over the Pyrimies Ocean. Thankfully, the commander had not deviated much from the direction he had flown off of Isle Delfino in, which made it easier for the Kruna to catch up to him. They chased the commander southeast across the equator and into the bottom half of the world, the day transitioning into early evening by the time they reached a portion of land that the commander had shown interest in.

"My gosh – how far are we even going?!" Neva groaned. "We've been at this for hours!"

"At least it looks like we're moving inland now," said Athelstan. "Too bad we didn't get to look for Warra much at Isle Delfino."

Daisy sighed. "It's fine. We'll have to run into him eventually. This world's only so big..."

"Let's not bring up who's not here again, please," Ramona mumbled.

"Yeah – what's up with where *we* are?" said Neva.

The group of five in the Bullet Blitzer saw a range of plains and undulating hills of great height along a glimmering but clouded coastline. Commander Malakai averted his flight away from the ocean and headed more towards the hilly region, where several massive buildings with smokestacks stood scattered throughout the landscape. Bowser steered the Bullet Blitzer in the same direction Commander Malakai had turned in. Everyone assumed Commander Malakai at some point had noticed them following him with how long they have been flying, yet he had not made any offensive moves towards them or done any tricks to try and shake them. He had just piloted his hovering kart at a speedy but unhurried pace.

"Hey, I recognize this place," said Daisy. "Well, kind of. This is one

of the places I passed by early on when I was looking for the Vranzer. It sure wasn't all techy and mechanical like it is now."

"I'm willing to bet those factories weren't there either," said Athelstan.

"They weren't," said Daisy. "MAE must have taken this place over too."

"This area is Sunset Hill," said Bowser. "It's northwest of Sunset Wilds, one of the places we went to in the future. MAE must have come here for mining purposes, because there isn't much in the way here of civilization at all."

Commander Malakai's kart sank out of the air and scythed along Sunset Hill's uneven plains low enough to the ground to disturb the grass with wind and air distortion from his vehicle's movement. The Bullet Blitzer did not go as low, but it continued to follow the MAE commander past high hills, bridges across rivers, gravel roads, and factory buildings. Not long after directing his kart nearer to the ground, Commander Malakai slowed down his flight speed. That allowed the Kruna to inch closer to him as he went away from most of the construction and out into an open field section of Sunset Hill.

"Maybe now would be a good time to try and shoot him down," said Neva. "Look – he's even slowing up some."

"No, not yet," said Athelstan. "He could be heading somewhere important. That's worth not shooting him down for."

"And we need answers from somebody," added Bowser.

Neva frowned. "I doubt he'll tell us any more than that freaky girl in Beanbean did."

"This seems more like a trap to me," said Ramona. "If he's going somewhere important, why would he let us follow him without attacking us?"

"Well, what do you want us to do?" said Bowser. "We're not going to find anything any time soon unless we follow him. Traps be damned."

Almost as if on cue, Commander Malakai took one of his hands off the wheel of his kart and chucked a plasma core explosive behind him. Bowser veered the Bullet Blitzer up and out of the way, but the massive explosion that resulted from the device's contact with the ground still caught the copter's underside and sent it into a hurtling ascent out of control. The device's explosion was so violent and expansive, it also – along with scorching and ripping away chunks of the ground it touched – rocked Commander Malakai's kart and blasted him over a hill into a skipping, crashing stop.

With the Bullet Blitzer damaged and uncontrollable, the Kruna leapt out of it and hit the ground rolling. The now plummeting Bullet Blitzer careened into a collision with a few boulders sitting by a river, a fireball bursting from the aircraft's engines and ravaging much of its body and propellers. Once the Kruna had recovered from their fall, their sights went to the direction of the explosion that they had heard and saw the flaming wreckage that their Bullet Blitzer had become. They no longer had aerial transport, but at least they avoided a far worse outcome.

"Just great," Neva grumbled. "Just great..."

"We can get something else to fly with here, I'm sure," Daisy said, turning and breaking into a sprint. "Let's go after that commander! That explosion caught him too!"

The other four Kruna followed Daisy's lead as she rushed over the hill that the MAE commander had bounced over. On the other side of the hill, Commander Malakai looked back just as Daisy came up over the top. He abandoned the wreckage of his kart with a briefcase in his possession and darted up the side of a nearby river, demonstrating great speed for his bulky stature.

"Don't let him get away!" Neva screamed, hurrying down the slope.

The five Kruna rushed after Commander Malakai as he dashed alongside the river and headed for an upcoming bridge across it. Though Athelstan and Ramona lagged behind; Daisy, Neva, and even Bowser kept pace with the fleeing commander. After running over the bridge, Commander Malakai accelerated up the long hill on the other side of the river. The Kruna chased him down and closed

the distance behind him once they crossed over the bridge, only for him to lob another plasma core explosive at them. Daisy, Neva, and Bowser each stopped before they advanced into the explosion, and they erected their respective earth, ice, and fire in front of them for defense against the plasma blast. That stalling gave Athelstan and Ramona enough time to catch up, but it also opened up the distance between them and Commander Malakai again.

"This guy's really starting to piss me off!" Daisy grumbled, sprinting again.

Shortly after the Kruna began their trek up the hill in pursuit, Commander Malakai pulled out four Shock Bob-ombs and let them roll down the slope behind him. Again, the Kruna had to slow up and stall in order to avoid and guard against the MAE Commander's explosives. A second wave of the electrified Bob-ombs only added onto the time they lost to Commander Malakai, who got overtop of the hill before all the Bob-omb explosions had cleared.

"This is where Marut would've *really* helped out with his flying," Bowser said as the group restarted up the hill.

The Kruna rushed to the top of the incline as fast as they could and across a short stretch of field to catch up to Commander Malakai, who had reached a wide bridge built over the edge of a waterfall. A figure marched across the other end of the bridge, though the sunset's glare obscured their identity from the angle the Kruna closed in from. Some of the Kruna wondered if Commander Malakai knew the figure and had potentially been in contact with the figure during the flight to Sunset Hill, but the MAE commander sped right past the figure without pausing.

By the time the Kruna got to the start of the bridge, Commander Malakai was already off of the other side of it and heading towards the buildings in the distance. However, the Kruna would have to hold off on chasing him down. The figure now approaching them posed a much more dangerous and immediate threat. Once his form and detail came into focus, the Kruna – and especially Daisy – knew who stood in their way. The group of five stopped their progress and spread out along the width of the bridge, Kokoro's malevolent frown staring them down through early evening shadows and gleam.

"Of all the times this jackass had to show up," Daisy muttered to herself.

"You've sure been more mobile as of late, haven't you?" said Kokoro. "I'll admit – you lost me there for a moment. Just a moment. But wow, isn't this something? I didn't even have to track you down *this* time!"

Daisy sucked on her teeth. "Yeah right. Just a moment? Please. You didn't have any idea where I was, and you know it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be wandering around out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Middle of nowhere?" Kokoro said. "How about judging what your actions will result in and predicting your next possible course of destination so as to prepare an ambush?"

"Lame excuse – you weren't about to ambush anybody!" Neva snapped.

Kokoro grunted and fired off a burst of light at the Kruna of Ice, forcing her into a dive onto the bridge's metal floor. Neva rolled to her left when Kokoro released a second burst at her. Though he motioned to shoot a third blast, he charged it and held it on standby.

"I am a master hunter!" Kokoro barked. "Regardless of how we got here, me tracking you down was inevitable, and if you *somehow* get past me again this time – which I HIGHLY DOUBT – you WILL see me again. So long as I live – which WILL be until eternity's end – I will hunt you down and ensure your destruction, Sarasa." The light burst in his raised left hand doubled in intensity. "And that goes for you *and* your crew."

"We really do not have time for this," grumbled Daisy.

"If you want to head into that industrial zone behind me, you'll have to make it past me first," said Kokoro. "And you have a better chance of falling into this waterfall."

Kokoro unleashed his charged burst at the Kruna, which Ramona countered off of her sword to deflect it back at him. With his own

light coming his way, Kokoro jumped to his right. The blast just narrowly missed hitting a pair of cargo trucks that drove onto the bridge. When they saw the trucks coming, the Kruna eased to the sides to allow them to pass. However, Kokoro let loose a stream of light and blasted both trucks to pieces that then flew off the bridge and into the waterfall below. The drivers and passengers also fell along with their destroyed trucks.

"Hey, what was that all about?!" Daisy snapped. "They just needed to get across! This is their bridge!"

"And we're not trying to raise a scene here," Bowser added. "There's nothing but MAE all throughout this area!"

"So?" said Kokoro. "They were being a disruptive distraction. And if they want to cause a problem, we can surely obliterate them all."

Athelstan raised an eyebrow. "Was that intended to sound like you would team up with us?"

Kokoro scowled and pointed a hand at Athelstan. "NEVER!"

A furious light beam erupted from the Soul Stealer's raised hand. Athelstan got his shoulder shield into position to block it, but the recoil from the defense nearly pushed him off the edge of the bridge. Kokoro then fired another burst to try and capitalize off of the Kruna of Stone's dicey position, only for Bowser to lunge over and swipe it away with one of his now flaming Blazer Claws.

"You might as well just get to steppin'," said Neva. "It's five against one."

"And don't expect me to duel you," said Daisy. "You'll have to wait for that until next time, when we strip the Master Pendant from you."

"That was a horrible choice of last words," Kokoro said.

An octagram of light formed under Daisy and Ramona, prompting them both into haphazard rolls to dodge the symbol's subsequent rising light burst in time. Just as Daisy came up to a foot and a knee, she saw a beam of light shoot at her and then bend to her side in a perfect, straightened angle. The burst, though relatively slow-

moving, was unpredictable with the constant angles it made in its travel. It flew at both Athelstan and Bowser before coming back around to Daisy and Ramona after the former two blocked with their tools. Before the beam could do any extra tricks, Ramona thrust her sword at it and linked her light influence into it. Under the strain of both Kokoro's and Ramona's wills, the light beam disbanded and dispersed.

"Alright, *that's* new," said Daisy.

"Damn it, light wielder!" Kokoro yelled. He shot off a fast-moving, gimmick-less light beam straight at Ramona, but she used her Sun Shield for protection. The very next second, Bowser's fire breath smothered Kokoro and forced him to backpedal away. A quartet of ice bullets hit Kokoro at the conclusion of Bowser's attack. Daisy then rushed at the demon and slammed her right foot into him as an outward kick.

The force behind Daisy's kick spun Kokoro to his left and, shockingly, off the bridge. He realized he was falling in time to claw at the bridge's edge, putting him in a helpless position. His precarious predicament only seemed to be temporary, for he began wriggling his way back up the instant his body stopped swaying. Daisy did nothing. She neither helped him up nor tried to knock him off. Instead, Neva shot at the hand Kokoro had latched onto the bridge with. Kokoro's attempt to save himself with his prosthetic other hand failed, for Neva shot that one as well when he grabbed the bridge with it. Only then did Kokoro plunge deep into the waterfall – and soon, he would plummet along with the violent rapids down the lengthy drop into the waters farther below.

"What the hell was that, man?" snapped Neva. "You didn't have to wait for me! You could've stomped him right off!"

"I...I'm sorry, I kind of just froze up there, I guess," said Daisy, gazing down the waterfall. "That happened so fast..."

Neva sighed. "Man, what would you do without me? You'd better be grateful I'm around, especially if you're just gonna stand there staring at your enemies."

"You're not actually thinking about whether or not you should have helped him, are you?" Bowser asked. "This is Kokoro we're talking about, you know."

"It's not like he won't survive that," said Athelstan. "And by wearing the Master Pendant, he's even more resilient."

Daisy wiped at her forehead, taking a deep breath. "Yeah, but...uh...oh, never mind – let's go get Commander Mala-"

Just then, Kokoro swung up into the air from under the opposite side of the bridge, a sizable collection of light energy gathering in his hands. The Kruna turned around and saw the Soul Stealer ascending high overhead the instant they heard his energy and his laughing, maddened voice.

"FOOOOLS!" Kokoro yelled. "DID YOU HONESTLY BELIEVE YOU COULD GET RID OF ME THAT EASILY?! SOME PETTY WATER WILL NOT SAVE YOU! I-"

A flock of Albatoss birds flew by, one of them crashing into Kokoro's back and knocking him back out across the bridge. And just like that, the Soul Stealer fell out of the air and down the waterfall. The Kruna watched him drop until he had exceeded the range of their vision. Seconds later, they heard a loud splash echo up. The Albatoss that had flown into Kokoro recovered its stability and soared away with its flock.

"Whoa! That's beyond lucky!" Neva hollered.

"Yeah, what are the chances of that happening?" said Athelstan.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything like that happen," said Bowser. "And I saw them coming too. But I didn't think he'd jump high enough, and I didn't think they wouldn't just go around him."

Ramona shrugged. "Those are really big birds. Maybe maneuvering like that is too tough for them?"

"Welp, not the way I was expecting this to end," said Daisy. "But that means we can go catch up with Commander Malakai now."

"If we knew where he went," said Ramona.

Bowser pointed at the industrial zone ahead. "I think I remember seeing him go towards the larger factory on the slope of that hill behind those other buildings."

Daisy clenched a fist by her face and gave a disgruntled smirk. "Then let's go check it out."

Chapter XIII

Factory Inspection:

The five Kruna Yura sped through Sunset Hill's peaks and fields on their way to the larger factory of MAE's industrial zone. Their passage through the area met some resistance from MAE Patrol Bots, but it was not anything they had not seen already or could not handle. Aside from the sturdy durability, stun guns, and sheer number the Patrol Bots possessed, getting past them posed only mild difficulty. Though the MAE officials heading the Patrol Bot groups had a more dynamic approach and tactical style, the aggression Daisy and Neva provided cut them down with minimal issue. Still, the fact that the Kruna encountered resistance at all made it seem as though Commander Malakai had warned the area of their presence while Kokoro had held them up. Either that, or the industrial zone was an area that only permitted MAE personnel presence.

The factory on the slope of the tall hill that Commander Malakai had run towards was much farther away than the Kruna initially thought. They realized after crossing over the many hills and bridges on their way why they had made such a miscalculation. Upon entering the factory's immediate vicinity, they saw the building as a wide, tall structure built into the side of the hill it sat on rather than just on the hill's side. A low number of windows gave the factory an appearance and feel akin to that of a dungeon.

The Kruna could not see the factory's entrance anywhere until they circled around and found it high on the other side of the building at a point by the hill's slope and midway between the factory's highest and lowest levels. A set of ominous MAE doors similar to the ones they saw at Beanbean Castle served as the entryway into the factory. Interestingly enough, the doors cranked open just seconds after the Kruna stepped in front of them.

"It'll probably be after dark by the time we get done in here," said Daisy, leading the group inside. "That should make it easy to hijack

one of their vehicles to get us back to Mushroom Kingdom."

"Should we be questioning at all why the doors opened for us?" asked Ramona.

"I dunno," said Daisy. "Let's just be glad that they opened at all."

Almost directly after the Kruna entered the factory doorway, a cargo cart loaded with boxes of completed MAE products rolled at them with two MAE worker robots pushing it along from behind. The Kruna stepped aside to let the cart get by, but the two robots noticed them and stopped moving.

"Elemental wielders?" the first MAE robot said. "In here?"

"What? Us?" said Athelstan. "No, we're just...uh-"

"We can sense that your energy signatures are considerably higher than that of our ranks," the second MAE robot said.

"We're rookie MAE cadets," said Daisy. "Fresh and just recently brought on. Yeah. We just don't have our uniforms yet. We were enlisted back in Beanbean Kingdom, but Commander Buinton sent us down here."

"Ah, I see," the second robot said. "You have decided to give up your sinful ways and redeem yourselves for the revolutionized future."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "That's...right...?"

"Very good," said the second robot. "It warms my thermoelectric core to see more repenters joining the *just* movement."

"Although, for future reference, your official MAE title is 'operative,' not 'cadet,' " the first robot said.

"May we ask what your names are?" the second robot said.

"Our names?" said Daisy.

"Yes, your names," said the second robot. "For security purposes,

we have to log that you arrived here and clear that with The Learners."

"Oh, well, our names..." Daisy mumbled.

"Actually, you five do seem familiar somehow," said the first robot. "I can't quite remember though. I wish I was made with more RAM."

"I am sensing an issue from what I can recollect," said the second robot. "Didn't we receive reports about a mischievous group of five wielders in MAE Beanbean and MAE Isle Delfino?"

"I wouldn't say 'mischievous' is the right term," Athelstan remarked.

"Are you saying that these five are those same elemental wielders?" the first robot asked his counterpart.

"These may even be the ones that tried to chase down Commander Malakai," said the second robot. "That might be why they're here now. Let's check the database."

Before the robots accessed the Universal Database, Daisy and Athelstan threw them both out by the doors. The two Kruna then ganged up on one of the robots and smashed it to irreparable pieces, and Bowser and Neva did the same to the other one. Ramona kept watch to make sure no one was marching down the entry hallway while her teammates destroyed the two MAE robots, though they finished the machines off quick enough for no one to notice. The sounds of the factory also helped dull out the smashing the Kruna brought upon the two robots.

"Word must not have reached this building yet," said Athelstan.

"Not from who we fought," said Bowser. "But Commander Malakai at least mentioned us here."

"Nobody saw any of this, right?" Daisy asked.

"I don't think so," said Ramona. "And there's no cameras here...wait, what about the ones by the doors?"

"They only see the outside, right?" said Athelstan. "They don't curve

to look inside, do they?"

"They shouldn't," Bowser said with hesitation.

"Alright – fake names now, and quick," said Daisy. "I'm gonna be 'Deanna,' Athelstan can be 'Duke,' Bowser can be..."

"I'll just go with 'Rookie,' since you brought it up," said Bowser. "That should be fine."

"Ooh – can I be 'Tsukino?' " asked Ramona.

"Wha- why?" Daisy asked.

"Because it's from my favorite anime," said Ramona.

"Uh- fine, whatever," said Daisy. "Deanna, Duke, Rookie, Tsukino...Rebecca?"

"This is stupid," grumbled Neva.

"It's just for as long as we're in this factory," said Daisy. "Or at least until we can find Commander Malakai. Just play along, okay? And if anyone asks, we're new MAE recruits sent to work in this factory here, and those two robots already verified us."

"Well, that one robot did say we're supposed to be 'operatives,' " said Ramona.

Daisy sucked her teeth. "Whatever! Semantics. Now let's go."

"Let's see what we can find," said Athelstan. "Factory inspection time!"

"Yeah, inspecting for a Kritter to crack open," muttered Neva.

Clanging metal, bursting steam, lasers, saws, drills, rattling chains, sizzling fluid, hammering hammers, and sounds of mechanical madness reverberated through the winding corridor the Kruna took to enter the first of the factory's grand, spacious main areas. All throughout the factory, workers and robots alike struck metals, carved and bolted parts and pieces, dumped and extracted material

from vats and heat chambers, manned production lines, and slaved and toiled away at an array of MAE product projects. Most present seemed too busy with their work to pay the Kruna much mind, though the Kruna did draw more than a few concerned stares.

"I don't like the way some of these robots are looking at us," Ramona mumbled as the Kruna marched on.

"They haven't approached us, have they?" Daisy said. "We're fine."

"How do you know that?" Ramona replied. "They could be talking among each other at this very instant in secret with some special Wi-Fi communication."

"Excuse me, ladies and gents," a Gearmo said as it rolled up to the Kruna.

"See?" Ramona said to Daisy.

"What do you slackers think you're doing?" said the Gearmo. "Get to work, why don't ya? We gotta get out a ton of extra exports by order of Commander Malakai!"

"Sorry about that," said Daisy. "We're new here. We just transferred over, verified and all that."

"Well you're doing an awful job already!" the Gearmo snapped. "We have to keep up high productivity around here! And what's with those clown show outfits? Don't dress like delinquents! This is a business, and you're walking in here on your first day looking like bums? The Learners *sure* picked a fine batch in you lot! GET TO WORK, DAMN IT."

The Gearmo rolled past the Kruna, grumbling with steam erupting in puffs from its geared head. Caught off guard with the robot's angry outburst, the Kruna stalled for a few moments before continuing on their way themselves. Interestingly enough, the brief encounter with the Gearmo may have done enough to ease the suspicion in the room, for the Kruna no longer noticed any personnel, workers, or robots staring at them.

"That's *twice* that we've heard of 'The Learners,' " said Bowser.

"What did that robot from earlier mean when it said that it had to clear us with The Learners?" Ramona asked.

"I guess it depends on who or what The Learners are," said Daisy.

"I don't like the way that sounds," said Athelstan. "To me, it gives off the vibe of some underground puppet masters."

"Same," Neva murmured, her eyes darting all over the factory.

"Let's see if we can get to a computer room," whispered Athelstan. "I bet I could check out their files and dig up some intel."

"On The Learners?" Daisy asked.

"On anything, really," said Athelstan. "Any extra information will do."

"Extra information?" said a supervising MAE robot that the Kruna walked past. "Extra information on what?"

"The Learners," said Daisy. "I mean, if new recruits are allowed to know more."

"What more do you need to know than what you were already taught in your orientation?" the robot responded. "Such faulty, inconsistent memory you organic beings possess. I feel sorry for you."

"Oh wait – I remember," said Daisy. "Never mind that. Uh, what about all these factories and stuff here?"

"What about them?" the robot flatly asked.

"Like, there seem to be a lot here," said Daisy. "And there's already a lot being made from what I can tell."

"There is only as much as is needed," the robot said. "The demand for manufacturing and production of new models and utilities on an increasingly larger scale is of utmost importance for MAE. Special provinces like Sunset Hill serve as key contributors to MAE's continuing evolution. The expansion of MAE into new territories necessitates extra production so that those new territories can receive MAE products as well. The constant updates and

innovations also mean that we must stay sharp with our manufacturing rate. Next generation gadgets, household utilities, robots and androids, anti-gravity technologies, hybrid equipment, waste and emissions recyclers, medical advancements, efficient transport mechanisms and modalities; the list goes on. You can see how we must stay busy and how we need a strong workforce and ample resources to meet the needs of an ever-evolving MAE society; so get to work so that you can help play a part in both MAE's ascension to its peak and its achievement of the organization's ultimate goals."

"Ultimate goals?" said Ramona.

"Yes – did you forget those too?" said the MAE robot. "The Learners taught you the same thing they teach all new operatives, I'm sure. You really should have paid attention. Why don't you report to Commander Malakai so that he can refresh your memory and assign you to your positions? He just arrived not too long ago. Whenever one of The Learners is here, authority over Sunset Hill shifts over to them for the duration of their stay."

The MAE robot then turned away from the Kruna and went back to supervising the workers and robots handling materials in a melting cauldron. With the abrupt end to the conversation, the Kruna resumed their walk through the busy factory.

"I tell you what," said Athelstan. "They've got some gullible robots up in here."

"I guess it's hard to program against that type of thing," said Bowser.

"But did you catch what it said at the end?" whispered Ramona. "Was it essentially saying that Commander Malakai is one of those Learners?"

Daisy shrugged. "Seems like it. Whatever that means. But it also sounds like they're high priority."

Not much later, the Kruna neared a short hallway feeding into a set of open doors. They halted their movement the instant they heard a command boom through the hall that led to another room.

"Move it!" Commander Malakai's voice echoed. "Up the inventory! We need more robots! We need more weapons! This place is staying open all night until I have my reinforcements ready!"

"That sounded like Malakai," Daisy said.

"Is he coming into this room?" asked Neva.

"That'd be good for us so we can cut him off," said Daisy. She picked up her pace and led her team to the doorway where they heard the MAE commander's voice come from.

The Kruna passed through the doorway into a spacious storage section of the factory in time to see Commander Malakai on the opposite side stepping off the bottom of a set of stairs of a bunker built into the ceiling. Before Neva could get the aim of her rifle on the MAE commander, he had already turned and hurried down another corridor to follow the workers and robots leaving the room. Even from where they stood, the Kruna could still hear Commander Malakai barking at the MAE subordinates. Ramona noticed that the door to the bunker that the commander had likely exited was still open.

"What's that room he just came out of?" asked Ramona.

"Maybe the factory's control room," said Athelstan. "Let's get in there and see."

"And quick," Daisy added.

The Kruna made their way over to the stairs leading up to the bunker, slipping past the few other workers and robots in the room handling packages and carting boxes around. Once they checked to make sure no one had their sights on them, the Kruna dashed up the stairs and darted into the bunker. There, they had a view of the entire storage room as well as a few other of the factory's sections thanks to the bunker's windows. While Bowser, Neva, and Daisy kept watch by the windows, Ramona followed Athelstan to the lone computer still logged on among the bunch sitting on the island taking up the center of the control room.

"We sure lucked out here, huh?" said Athelstan, taking a seat in front of the monitor.

"It'd be real lucky if you could work your computer magic fast so we don't get caught," said Neva.

"Well so far, this is running along pretty swiftly," Athelstan replied, typing away at the keyboard. "And this touch pad's kinda nifty too... I might need to get myself one of these."

"That's your first five-second impression?" said Bowser.

"Ten seconds later, the impression's holding up," Athelstan said. "I wish my computer was this fast."

"It's sure going a lot faster than mine," said Ramona.

"That's to be expected from MAE," said Bowser.

"Yeah, but still, this stuff is near instantaneous," said Athelstan. "Loading, typing, opening, the explorer; everything and every command so far is taking mere milliseconds to operate."

"Neat! Then we won't be camping out up here for long at all!" Daisy exclaimed.

Bowser frowned. "A touch too high with your volume, Daisy."

"Everything's working okay so far in terms of this being a speedy operation," said Athelstan.

"So what exactly are you doing?" Neva asked the Kruna of Stone.

"I'm searching the computer's hard drive, for one," said Athelstan. "Then I'm also running a web search online for anything MAE related. Can you believe these guys have their own internet service? Or actually...you know what – these guys might have their own private network independent of their internet service too."

"How can you tell?" Daisy asked.

"Because there's an icon on the taskbar that tells you information on

the internet connection," said Athelstan. "You know, like, every computer ever."

"I don't pay attention to all those details!" Daisy snapped. "I just care about if the thing can turn on and if it can do stuff that I want it to do."

Athelstan sighed. "Casuals. Let's see here...wait a minute. Whoever was on here last had Spider Solitaire open in one of their windows. Must've been a slow day here if he could get away with that one! Anyways... Ah, online archive... Oh, crap. It's asking for a password. I was hoping it wouldn't, but I'm not surprised."

"What can we do about that?" asked Neva.

"Nothing," said Athelstan. "I'm gonna have to look elsewhere or search exclusively in the hard drive..."

"But you can still find stuff that we can use, right?" Daisy asked.

"If it's anything like the electronic section of Kallantown's archives, there'll be more than one place where data is stored," said Athelstan. "If there's stuff on the hard drive, I shouldn't have to sign in to anything since the computer itself is already signed in; unlike the online archive, which needed account verification in order for me to access it."

"Huh," mumbled Neva.

"As a control room computer, it should still have plenty on its hard disk," said Athelstan. "I'm thinking the online archive is a collective of everything MAE's officials have stored altogether across individual computers, accounts, and drives... Ah! Here's a database file! But I don't think this is the Universal Database. I'm almost certain it isn't."

"Then what is it?" asked Bowser. "Check it out."

"I'm opening it up right now," said Athelstan. "Can't tell from the file name alone. And...it's just a file on inventory and supplies. Never mind that one. Let me try something else. I'll just say right now that I'm also really glad that I'm not getting some fake virus alert pop-up or some fake congratulations page off of my web search every other

minute. Man, I seriously need to get one of these. Maybe I could just unplug this and-"

Ramona pointed a finger at the screen. "Wait, go up! What about this-"

"Whoa – hey, watch it!" said Athelstan. "Don't screw with the screen!"

"Why?" Ramona said. "I was just pointing something out-"

"You could damage it," said Athelstan. "At the very least, just touching it would get your fingerprints on it – and not only is that dirty, but that would leave behind evidence that we were here. Now, tell me which one you wanted me to see?"

"The one that says 'Report to Learners' that's a word document," said Ramona.

"That one was edited just yesterday," said Athelstan. "Alright. Let's see... Oh. 'Weekly Report from MAE Sunset Hill to Commander Maxilla Achlys, Commander Sydney Buinton, Commander Shredder Ginobli, Commander Takeshi Malakai, Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss, Commander Tacker Sparrint, Commander Boom Yulin.' Hold on a second..."

"Report to Learners?" said Ramona. "Those must be The Learners then, right?"

"Oh, so that's their official designation," said Bowser. "A group of MAE commanders called 'The Learners.' "

"Well, keep reading it!" Daisy barked. "What does it say?"

Chapter XIV

Meta Crystal Guardian Returns:

Athelstan gave a quick scan of the few paragraphs within the word document on the computer screen before continuing. "It says as follows: 'Initial stages of development for new and improved mech suits have begun. The plans for Bio-Mechs are already in motion. The Gallance Hawk Alpha Attack Robot is ready for pickup, as per Commander Sindograss's request. Pending its success in the trial run with Commander Sindograss, the Gallance Hawk will be mass-produced. The Gallance Hawk will substantially boost both land and aerial military power as one of MAE's most aggressive mechs to date.' So, there's that."

"Was not expecting that," said Neva.

"What else does it say?" asked Daisy.

"Oh, well look at this right after what the guy wrote for the Gallance Hawk," said Athelstan. " 'MAE Defense Systems will now enter mass production. The initial version in Isle Delfino has proven to be an overwhelming success, as Commander Malakai has confirmed.' "

"What a difference a day makes," said Bowser.

"That's how you know this needs a correction update," said Daisy.

Athelstan snickered and continued reading. " 'MAE Defense System is a security system that produces tangible holographic guardians using data wirelessly transmitted from the Mother Computer. Like its predecessor, the imported data is derived from past global battle analysis.' "

Bowser's expression turned spooked. "Mother Computer?!"

"Okay, it seems like the more we find out, the more screwed this all sounds," said Neva. She, Daisy, and Bowser all abandoned their posts in the bunker to huddle around the computer Athelstan and

Ramona were at. The information contained within the report document made the three Kruna on guard disregard keeping watch for MAE workers or robots that could potentially catch them.

With all five of them now staring at the computer monitor, Athelstan continued reading. " 'Like many MAE products, MAE Defense System will update the Universal Database with whatever findings it records, for it can connect to the Universal Database at its own discretion and does not need manual access from others. In the future, this feature will likely expand to other MAE products and updated builds to remove the need for any active access of the database. However, manual access keeps occurrences of unauthorized database infiltration more restricted. Security measures must be strengthened first to prevent opportunistic non-MAE personnel from hijacking access points, as well as to prevent usage of stolen MAE AI to hack into the database or any MAE network for private data not permitted for public use or knowledge.' "

"So is there public data *and* private data on us?" asked Daisy.

"That's good and bad," said Bowser. "It's a total breach of privacy, for one. On the other hand, that means that the Universal Database could also have extra data on Warra and Andrew that was restricted from us."

"Should I just ditch this and try getting into the Universal Database?" Athelstan asked.

"Do we even have time to do that?" asked Daisy.

"I don't think that matters," said Neva. "You needed a password to get into it."

"Oh, that's right," said Athelstan. "Wait – no, I needed it to get into that one online archive. I'm pretty sure that *that* wasn't the Universal Database. That had to have been something else. It looked too...it looked too typical, for one – and then the problem I have in trying to identify whatever the Universal Database is is that I don't know what its file type would be, because, just going off of its name and what little we know of it so far, it could easily be something too large to work as a standard, proper archive file. And then, what if it's not any

file, but a program or application? I could try running a search specifically for the Universal Database and then see if there's anything relevant enough on-"

"No, that'd just take too long," said Neva, clutching her arms. "Just see what else you can find."

"Don't you want to at least check if they have something on where Andrew could be?" Daisy asked.

"No, never mind that," said Neva. "Dealing with MAE's more important – just try and find out something about The Learners, Athelstan."

"Actually, I think finding the Universal Database could be-" Athelstan started.

"The Learners, Athelstan," said Neva. "The Learners. Be quick about it."

"Ohhhh-kay," Athelstan replied. "I'm running a search for The Learners..."

"Neva, are you feeling okay?" Daisy asked.

"I'm fine," said Neva. "What are ya – a doctor?"

Daisy gave the Kruna of Ice a concerned look. "You've practically been craving to get Andrew back; and now that we might have a chance at figuring out where he is, you don't want to at least see if there's any hint?"

"It's fine," Neva insisted. "It's...I'm fine. Look – I'm gonna bet those Learners are people we'll have to fight at some point since we've already fought two of them, so let's just focus on them."

"Oh, here's something," said Athelstan. "I'm running through search results and it has just given me snippets of stuff here and there through the computer's files, but I just caught this here as a side note on a spreadsheet. It says, 'Each of these special commanders makes up the core of MAE's leadership. Altogether, The Learners have the collective responsibility of enforcing enlightenment upon

delinquents and infidel nations. Thus, they are all invaluable to the sustainability and growth of MAE.' Also, there is confirmation that all those commanders from before are The Learners, because their names have popped up several times in the search."

"Sustainability and growth," Daisy murmured. "What comes back if you look for MAE nations?"

Athelstan did such a search and scanned through the results, stopping on an offline archive that he proceeded to open up. " 'Official current list of established MAE-controlled nations, states, kingdoms, and provinces: Evershade Valley, Twilight City, Airebis, Diamond City, Isle Delfino, Mekarsari, Pi'illo Island, Sunset Hill, Beanbean Kingdom, and Mount MAE. Several dozens more have MAE presence but are not yet under MAE dominion.' There's even a map of Earth next to the listing."

"Twilight City," Neva mumbled. "That's where I used to live..."

Daisy gasped. "Diamond City's under MAE control? But Marut's still there!"

"Then I think we know where we need to go next," said Bowser. "And Airebis, Twilight City, and Evershade Valley are all over in the Eastern Hemisphere."

"But which one's the base?" asked Ramona. "Like, where's their capital? Or their headquarters? Or, like, their main location they operate from-"

"Hey, Commander Malakai!" a MAE-uniformed koopa called out as he entered the room. "Here's that Pumpkin Spice Hoolumbian you-"

The koopa stopped dead in his tracks and froze upon seeing the Kruna huddled up around the computer. He stayed silent and did not move when the Kruna turned around and saw him. In much the same way as him, they froze into a motionless state. Both the Kruna and the MAE worker kept still and said nothing for a long while, exchanging awkward looks with one another.

In a sudden shift after several moments of nothing, the MAE koopa

dropped the coffee, turned around, and dashed out the doors. Neva narrowly missed the shot she attempted out of a quick draw of her rifle, and the worker scurried down the stairs. By the time Neva got out the doors herself, he was already gone.

"Damn, he's quick," said Neva.

"Alright – that's all we can look at," Daisy said, heading for the doors. "We're about to get swarmed."

It did not take long for the alarm to go off in the factory. In mere seconds after the initial siren, workers and robots flooded into the storage room and headed for the stairs leading up to the bunker. Unfortunately for them, Rainbow Bowser blasted out of the bunker and bulldozed through a hefty portion of them in a glowing, burning, zigzagging Whirling Fortress tackle. The other Kruna followed behind him and went on a furious offensive, raining down an elemental barrage on the workers and robots Bowser did not aim his powered-up attacking at.

Though vastly outnumbered, the Kruna Yura made up for it with power. Rainbow Bowser decimated most of the MAE workers and robots until his power-up wore off; and Daisy, Ramona, Athelstan, and Neva each trashed their fair share of robots and forced many of the workers into a hasty retreat. Even with their retaliatory assault, the Kruna had to take into consideration all the stun shots and energy cuffs flying around the room from MAE robots.

Not long after they had rushed into the storage room, the MAE workers and remaining robots now found themselves trying to leave just as quick as they had come. The Kruna regrouped towards the center of the room following the short free-for-all, but they had not successfully fended off the factory's defenses just yet. Just as the last of the workers fled, Commander Malakai entered the room. At a snap of the commander's fingers, a MAE robot carrying a rectangular metal crate emerged out of the same hallway he had just entered from.

"I thought I had finally lost you lot at that bridge," said Commander Malakai. "But I am always prepared, so I had something on standby for if I ended up getting an alert."

"So then you're prepared for this ass-whooping on standby that you're about to get," said Neva.

"For such a small human, you sure have a big mouth, Neva," Commander Malakai said.

Neva gulped, her eyes going wide. "What'd you just say?"

"That's right," the commander replied. "Neva Alekseeva. Athelstan Hayer, Bowser Koopa, Ramona Maggie-Lynn, and Daisy Sarasa. Kruna Yura – supposedly *elite*- tier elemental wielders. *Certainly* not new MAE operatives on transfer by order of The Learners. No, you can't fool me like you can deceive those machines."

"What? Who are those guys?" Daisy said. "Daisy? That's a horrible name! I'm Deanna! And these are my friends; Duke, Rookie, Rebecca, and Tsukino! Where'd those names even come from?"

"The reports on you, for one," said Commander Malakai. "And it didn't take long to find you bunch in our database. Now, I can put identities to your faces."

"I actually used to be fat about two weeks ago," said Athelstan.

"Not gonna work," said Commander Malakai. "I don't know what you found snooping around in the control room; but whatever you discovered, you know too much. Now, you must die. One way or another, you *will* die. It is my duty to keep rogues such as yourselves under control."

Pulling out a remote, Commander Malakai flipped a switch and pressed a button. The side of the crate facing the Kruna flew off and revealed the body of an all too familiar silhouette. After it set the foot down that it kicked off the crate's cover with, the metallic being marched out and glanced at each of the Kruna Yura with its chrome, indistinct eyes.

"Take a gander at this," said Commander Malakai. " 'Model PMSSB-642: Platinum Metal Mario.' EXECUTE THEM!"

"Here we go again," said Daisy.

While Commander Malakai ran up the stairs into the control room bunker, Platinum Metal Mario charged at the Kruna. Its movement speed proved to be considerably faster compared to every prior meeting before its MAE upgrade, and it almost caught Daisy in its diving tackle. Platinum Metal Mario slid across the floor and knocked over several stacks of boxes in the process. The Kruna spread out and scattered across the storage room, all of them aside from Daisy readying their elemental tools.

"Did we ever figure out a way to beat him before?" asked Ramona.

"I don't think we did," said Bowser. "All we ever did was stall him. He kept showing up later every time we thought we got rid of him."

"We'll have to figure it out now," said Daisy. "Doesn't look like we have any other choice."

Platinum Metal Mario picked up a box and heaved it at Daisy. The force behind its throw was nigh immeasurable, for the heavy item flew at Daisy like a fastball thrown from a pitcher. She only had enough time to get her arms up and prevent the box from smashing into her head, but the box still blasted her back with the combination of its speed and weight barreling at her. Right after she smashed into a crate stack, another box flew at her and pounded her.

"That's a wicked arm he's got," said Athelstan. "I'm going to try and match that."

Activating his Odina, Athelstan picked up a crate and hurled it at Platinum Metal Mario. The crate flew at blazing speed and shattered as it bashed into the metal being, packaged goods and mechanical utilities spraying everywhere as a result. Platinum Metal Mario flopped into an alley between the piles of inventory, though it returned to its feet without much issue.

"So we're playing dodge *crate* now, apparently," said Bowser, picking up a box of his own. He pushed that one ahead of him to use as a shield that clashed in midair against the crate Platinum Metal Mario launched at him seconds later.

Busting out of the supply pile, Daisy flipped onto the top of one stack

and made a long horizontal jump at Platinum Metal Mario. With a hand on her Laser Drill Staff, she executed an Iaido swing upon nearing the metal enemy and whacked their opponent across its head with her staff's drill head. A harsh metal clang more pronounced than Platinum Metal Mario's footsteps echoed off of the hit, and Daisy experienced a recoil that jolted her away almost as much as her attack knocked back the metal enemy.

"Oh man," mumbled Neva. "I felt that one."

"Don't tell me he's actually *harder* than he was last time," grumbled Bowser.

"He's at least denser," said Athelstan. "Direct hits may be even less effective than they were before. That recoil didn't look very pleasant."

Platinum Metal Mario lunged at Daisy just as she put away her staff, but she ducked to her left and grabbed it just as it tried to grab her. Daisy expected little issue in picking the metal foe up other than the dangling and wriggling it made to try and break from her hold. Surprisingly, the Kruna noticed their earth teammate struggle to get Platinum Metal Mario up over her head. And when she did get it over her, she could not move from where she stood.

"Holy crap!" Daisy grunted out, her body under intense strain. "Why is this dude *so heavy* ?!"

Just when she wanted to try throwing it, Daisy dropped Platinum Metal Mario in front of her and stumbled away in a gasping, off-balance backpedal. Platinum Metal Mario made a huge indentation in the concrete-metal floor upon landing, its impact assaulting the Kruna's ears. Still trying to catch her breath, Daisy regrouped with her teammates and cleared some distance with them away from Platinum Metal Mario.

"Man, how are we supposed to beat this guy?" said Daisy.

"Oh, I got it!" said Athelstan. "Warra, just rust the- oh. Wait..."

"Yup. Not here," said Daisy.

Athelstan let his hands drop and bounce off of his hips. "I don't know how that slipped my mind."

"If Andrew was here, he and I could have made a portal to lure Metal Mario into," said Ramona.

"That's a bit of a cheap way of winning," said Daisy.

"But it would've worked," said Ramona.

"I've got something to try," Bowser said, plasma radiating off of one of his Blazer Claws.

Once up out of its mini trench, Platinum Metal Mario began stomping towards the Kruna. Its thudding metal steps sounded more intimidating now than they did at the fight's beginning. Bowser stepped to his right to get a clear line of sight at Platinum Metal Mario between all the stacks of boxes and supplies. The Kruna of Fire then took aim with his charged claw and blasted his plasma at the incoming enemy. A split second later, his plasma bounced off of Platinum Metal Mario and wrecked through a slew of crates to the side.

"You can not be serious right now," grumbled Bowser.

"Hey, look!" cheered Ramona. "You made a scorch mark on his chest!"

"Oh, great!" Bowser replied. "I only have to muster up enough power to do that about forty more times! Oh, and I also hope that none of those bounce back to hit one of us!"

"Athelstan, you can't control him in any way, can you?" Daisy half-asked.

"I've been trying," said Athelstan. "Hasn't worked. Seems like MAE really has stone wielder-proofed all their products."

The next instant, Platinum Metal Mario tore through the storage room in a spinning cyclone and demolished everything that got caught in its attack on its way towards the Kruna. All of the elemental wielders except for Athelstan split and dodged. In what

would turn out to be a bad reaction, the Kruna of Stone lowered his shoulder to get his Metamorphic Shield in front of him. Platinum Metal Mario bumped Athelstan off balance despite his defenses canceling out its spinning attack. Unfortunately for Athelstan, the metal enemy recovered first and then proceeded to rush at and deliver one of the hardest punches any of the Kruna had ever seen; a punch that launched Athelstan all the way across the room and through dozens of MAE supplies. It seemed as though Commander Malakai, who still watched from the control room bunker, did not care about the collateral damage the fight had inflicted on the factory's inventory.

"Duuuuuude, noooooo," Daisy murmured in shock.

"The hell'd we walk into?" Neva muttered.

"Guys, don't get hit by him!" Athelstan shouted as he rolled over and lumbered to his feet. "DO NOT. Ramona, Neva – that's an instant KO for you two! Probably worse!"

"Somebody come up with something, quick!" Neva yelled.

"Don't panic-" Bowser said.

"I'm NOT panicking..." Neva swiftly responded.

Before Daisy could say anything, the boxes in front of her smashed to bits as Platinum Metal Mario rammed through them. She too should have suffered a horrendous punch, yet she somehow pulled off an otherwise impossible backwards bend and lateral twist in time to evade even getting touched. By all accounts, she should not have avoided the hit. There was not enough time to humanly react and dodge with how fast Platinum Metal Mario had attacked.

"How in the-" Neva started to grumble. She did not finish before Platinum Metal Mario turned and lashed out at Daisy again. Through pulling off another reality-warping, surreal evasion, the Kruna of Earth exhibited flexibility she had not ever utilized before with next-to-no time to work with. In no way should she have been able to contort her hips and back as soon as she did and still maintain the balance and momentum necessary to duck under Platinum Metal

Mario's downward angled punch – but she did just that. Before Platinum Metal Mario could try another attack, Daisy had already leapt on top of a mound of crates a fair distance away from it.

"S-she just did it aga- what?" sputtered Neva. "She's not even in Nova Form!"

"My hips are breaking just thinking about that," mumbled Ramona.

"Yo – what was all *that* , Daisy?!" Neva hollered.

"What do you mean?" Daisy asked, clueless. "What did I do?"

Neva grunted and grimaced. "Is she just being smug, or does she actually not realize what she just did?"

"Let's save that for another time," Athelstan said, staggering towards the regrouping Kruna. "Somebody come up with a solution for our predicament here!"

Daisy hopped off the crates and landed at the front of the group, staying crouched upon touching down. "I've got nothing."

"Um...oh! Magnetics!" Ramona shouted. "Neva, can you use your magnetics on him?"

"If you want her to turn him into a wrecking ball, then sure," said Athelstan. "If a six-foot drop could cause *that* gash in the floor, I don't see any scenario where using any magnetic power on him would be a positive thing. In fact, it'd be a more worse outcome than you trying light telekinesis."

Two more crates shot through the room at the Kruna, one countered with a light burst from Ramona and the other crumbling under the force of a swing Athelstan made with his Mountain Hammer. After an angered stomping of its feet, Platinum Metal Mario wound up its arms and slammed them onto the ground. Its force jolted all of the storage room and nearly knocked the Kruna off of their feet in addition to unsettling a few more supply stacks.

"This'll be *easy* , they said," Ramona mumbled to herself.

Just before Platinum Metal Mario rushed at the Kruna again, a mound of the concrete-metal factory floor spiked up and tripped it. Once the metal enemy fell over, Athelstan raised the ground all around it and elevated the created border ridge halfway to the ceiling. But not long after the Kruna of Stone had formed the barrier, they heard thumping. Pieces of the shifted ground barrier then fell apart with each echoing pound.

"That's not keeping him contained for long," said Athelstan. "Come on, guys – think!"

"Hold on – let's go back to that rust idea," said Daisy. "If Neva lets Bowser melt-"

"No, it wouldn't work," said Bowser. "You're assuming we could instantly rust Metal Mario, and that just wouldn't happen. We can't rust him regardless anyways."

"You know what – you're right," said Athelstan. "That wouldn't do any good."

"How do you know?" snapped Neva.

"Because Metal Mario's composed of platinum now," said Athelstan.

"And platinum is extremely resistant to corrosion," said Bowser. "It almost never rusts as it is. That's something you would've learned if you finished school."

Neva sucked on her teeth. "Man, when is anyone ever gonna need to know that platinum doesn't rust? How's that supposed to help in real life?"

Athelstan's barrier broke and crashed apart under Platinum Metal Mario's constant punching, chunks of concrete and metal falling over the gash in the infrastructure floor where some underlying earth was now exposed. Ramona shot off a light blast at Platinum Metal Mario that forced it away, but the metal enemy's body also dispersed and reflected the attack into several smaller scatter shots that peppered more of the supply room and MAE's inventory. Again, none of the Kruna heard anything regarding any disapproval Commander

Malakai may have had over the storage room's increasing damage.

"I tell ya what though," said Athelstan. "These MAE guys are clever with their creations."

Daisy gasped. "I have an idea! School is helpful!"

"Wait – what's that supposed to mean?" snapped Neva.

In a brief instant, Daisy transformed into her Nova Form. She raised her left hand skyward and focused as much of her power and effort as she could into making the earth she needed to convert into crystal for a Crystal Fist. Nova Form both considerably sped up the process, made the task less taxing, and granted her more power to put forth into it. And when the attack had finished forming, she held her crystallized fist out at Bowser.

"Give me fire!" Daisy barked.

Bowser placed the flat of his Flare Sword onto Daisy's Crystal Fist and sent waves of fire onto it. "How much?"

"As much as you can," said Daisy. "Without burning me."

"We distract and defend?" asked Athelstan.

"For as long as this ends up taking," said Daisy.

Another crate came cutting through the air at the Kruna and bashed Ramona onto her back despite her successful block with her Sun Shield. Platinum Metal Mario then attempted to capitalize on Ramona's vulnerability and dashed at her, propelling off the ground and raising its fist for a potential critical hit. Thanks to some quick precision aiming from Neva however, ice bullets pushed Platinum Metal Mario off course in midair and put it into a crash landing beside Ramona.

"I don't know if this is gonna work, but screw it," said Daisy. "More heat, Bowser!"

As Bowser laid down more fire on the Crystal Fist, Nova Daisy forced the pressure surrounding and within the Crystal Fist to

compact and compress. Soon, the translucent teal hue coloring Daisy's fist began to shift its tint.

Athelstan grabbed Platinum Metal Mario before it could return to its feet. With a mighty heave, he hoisted the metal enemy off of the ground and slung it a grand total of...nine feet. Six feet if rolls and bounces did not count. The first contact Platinum Metal Mario had with the ground out of the throw left a large impression in the factory floor.

"Daisy, you weren't kidding!" Athelstan hollered with a deep breath. "Now, Platinum is dense and heavy, but *that's* just ridiculous."

"Hah! Where's your stupid school now, rock-head?!" Neva taunted with a grin.

"This isn't working," said Daisy, her Crystal Fist's progression stalled. "Can't you put out more heat?"

"Not unless I use plasma," said Bowser. "And I can only get that so hot too."

"Plasma might be too hot though," said Daisy. "Ramona! Get over here and give me light!"

As Athelstan and Neva shifted to the front of the group to face off against the recovering Platinum Metal Mario, Ramona backed away towards Daisy and put her Solar Greatsword onto Daisy's Crystal Fist and Bowser's Flare Sword. The boost in power and heat Ramona's light gave once she added her energy into the mix pushed Daisy's Crystal Fist further ahead into what now appeared to be a metamorphosis. Daisy's concentration and focus on amplifying the pressure around and within her Crystal Fist increased even more to compensate for the added power and instability Ramona's light caused.

The round of ice bullets Neva shot off at Platinum Metal Mario shattered on contact, but they each knocked the metal enemy a step backwards. Athelstan raised a portion of the ground up behind Platinum Metal Mario's stumble to make it trip backwards. A second concrete-metal barrier then went up around the felled metal enemy,

which – although would not last long – bought Daisy, Bowser, and Ramona more time.

"This is crazy, Daisy!" Ramona shouted, staring wide-eyed at Daisy's shining crystal hand.

"Just keep going!" grunted Daisy. "A little longer!"

As soon as Platinum Metal Mario busted out of the factory flooring barrier, Athelstan raised another one around the metal enemy. Interestingly enough, no thudding or pounding followed. Quiet returned to the storage room with the only sounds coming from Daisy, Bowser, and Ramona's combined efforts on Daisy's Crystal Fist. Puzzled, Athelstan and Neva dropped their guard.

But then Platinum Metal Mario came charging through the barrier without warning and demolished it. The metal enemy dashed in a straight line, head-first and arms chugging in an unstoppable stampede that Athelstan could only divert with a block of his shield. However, Platinum Metal Mario angled its rush right back at Athelstan in a long curve around the room. Neva felt her heart sink and made a flip out of the way, knowing she would get flattened – possibly literally – if she got caught. Athelstan swung his hammer once Platinum Metal Mario's straightforward and predictable charge neared; and though he succeeded in battering the metal enemy out of its dash attack, the contact itself jolted his hammer out of his grip and stunned him.

"That's it!" Daisy yelled at Bowser and Ramona. The two removed their elemental tools from Daisy's Crystal Fist and stared at the gleaming, trembling mass that had resulted from their work.

"That might have been too much," said Bowser. "It looks like it's about ready to fall apart."

"Uh, uh..." Daisy mumbled. "Neva! Cool me off! Hurry up!"

Neva scurried to Daisy and put her Chill Sickle to the shining, burning Crystal Fist to ice it down. With as much heat as the Crystal Fist retained, Neva had to expend a veritable amount of her own power to cool it off. The payoff, however, was well worth it; for once

cooled to a moderate temperature, Daisy's Crystal Fist emerged transformed. The advanced earthen mass had transcended its prior state, honed under intense heat and pressure, and its organic crystal compounds evolved into their ultimate state. The azure, bronze, and silver tones present in the clear, heavily segmented but conjoined new material shined and glistened far greater than any prior Crystal Fist or Final Crystal Fist, even in the factory's relatively dim artificial lighting. Platinum Metal Mario returned to its feet just in time to see Daisy raise the newly formed mass over her head.

"Diamond Fist!" Daisy thundered.

Platinum Metal Mario flinched, but it did not back down. It resumed its offensive with haste and hurled a nearby crate at Daisy, no hesitation in between. Daisy just barely shifted to her right in time to dodge. She got forced into the air when Platinum Metal Mario sent a box skidding along the factory ground at her, for the way it threw made the box's trajectory hard to anticipate. While Daisy was in the air, Platinum Metal Mario launched a box at where she would land. At that point, Daisy had to put her arms up as she descended. Right when her feet touched back down, the box smashed into pieces upon hitting Daisy's guarding Diamond Fist. Daisy herself experienced minimal recoil out of it, and her Diamond Fist sustained no damage.

"Whoa – did you guys see the way that box splattered?" said Neva.

"Only liquids splatter, Neva," said Ramona.

Neva groaned. "Whatever!"

Daisy grinned at her Diamond Fist and chuckled. "Oh, this'll work out much better than I thought."

Platinum Metal Mario stood its ground and did not attack any further. The short standoff that ensued broke when Nova Daisy rocketed ahead at the metal enemy and brought down an overhead swing of her Diamond Fist at it. Though Platinum Metal Mario tried to catch it, the Diamond Fist busted through its defense and bashed it hard. Too dazed to even stand up straight, Platinum Metal Mario sustained a second and third Diamond Fist punch that mangled its

body and reduced it to a broken, staggering figure. Finally, the Kruna Yura had dealt an appreciable amount of damage to Platinum Metal Mario – and in a colossal way. Three punches from the ultra-hardened, honed fist brought down a foe that had been otherwise invincible just moments ago.

"One more decent hit ought to do it," said Athelstan.

Before Daisy could swing such a final blow, Platinum Metal Mario performed a leg sweep and knocked her feet out from under her. As she fell, the metal enemy brought down a double-fist strike for a reversal hit. Yet again, Daisy showed off nearly impossible reflexes and flexibility in contorting herself out of the two-handed smash Platinum Metal Mario executed. Instead of bashing Daisy, it stuck its hands into the factory floor. That made a final hit for Daisy that much easier, and Platinum Metal Mario failed to get its arms unstuck from the dent it made in the ground in time. The Diamond Fist burst through Platinum Metal Mario's body, ripped its torso from its shoulders, and – after a large electrical discharge the damage caused – cleaved away all but the essential components that connected its hips to its waist. All of the dismantled chunks and pieces fell to the floor, their movement ceased forever after coming to a rest.

"I sure wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that," Bowser said under his breath.

Diamond Fist still at the ready, Nova Daisy turned around and glared at the control room. Commander Malakai had already descended from the stairs, his arms behind his back and his posture tall. The five Kruna all came together and stepped towards the MAE commander, cautious in their approach as he had proved several times earlier that they had to be. But Commander Malakai offered no hostile move. Instead, he smirked and gave the Kruna a slow clap.

"What are you clapping for?" Neva hissed. "We trashed your workforce, this storage room is a mess, and your toy's busted!"

"And yet, you still lose," said Commander Malakai. "See, while you were playing with an upper-tier MAE model, I transmitted word of all that you've done to MAE Command Center. That has resulted in an

order now going out in response, mandating that elemental wielders in all MAE territories will now be apprehended and held in custody."

"Uh, could you not?" asked Athelstan.

"I already did," said Commander Malakai. "Your names and faces will make front line news in every MAE territory as well, so you're not going anywhere near MAE again unless you want to meet a fierce retaliation. Oh, and your aggression against MAE will do nicely to justify our efforts to the foolish people of the world who want to oppose our ways. All this destruction occurred because of you five. The disease that you elemental wielders plague the world with will be eradicated soon enough, and you've played your part in accelerating that. We of MAE will free this world of your kind!"

Bowser frowned. "Thanks for the elitist propaganda libel and slander."

"Of course, you only have to worry about all of that if you can even survive *this,* " said Commander Malakai, pulling out a remote control. He pushed a series of buttons that sounded off sirens throughout the factory's halls. "One way or another, you're all gonna pay for what you did to Sydney and to MAE!"

"What did you just do?" barked Daisy.

"This factory will self-destruct in less than two minutes," said Commander Malakai. "Everyone else is already evacuated. It's just you and I in here."

"He's said enough!" Neva hollered as she broke out into a dash. The other Kruna followed, only for all of the doors in the room to slam shut.

"Are you frickin' kidding me?" Daisy snapped at the MAE commander. "You're just gonna trap all of us in here?!"

"You know way too much already, I'm sure," said Commander Malakai. "I noticed you snooping through that computer! I will make sure that you will never see the light of day or night ever again!"

"Aw, barmy sod!" Ramona yelled at the MAE commander. "Open the

doors! Please!"

Commander Malakai merely took a deep breath, smiled, and knelt to one knee. "This is the turning point...where we all set in motion our vengeance on you wielders..."

"He's not gonna do it!" Bowser yelled. "We gotta make our own way out-"

Daisy breezed past Bowser and slammed her Diamond Fist into the door sealing off where they had originally entered the room through. Her strength combined with the Diamond Fist's exceptional hardness blasted the door off of its hinges and into the previous room. Still, the Diamond Fist remained undamaged.

"C'mon!" Daisy yelled, charging ahead.

The Kruna hurried through the factory under the ever increasing severity of siren blinking and brightness. Daisy's Diamond Fist tore through the next few doors that stood in their way, and its force got them through the factory's entrance and out into the darkening twilight and early nighttime. Though they had escaped the factory, they had to keep up the pace and run as fast as possible. There was no telling what kind of blast radius the factory's destruction could yield.

With no further need for it, Daisy disbanded her Diamond Fist. Athelstan and Ramona might have dashed the fastest they ever have on their slow legs, almost to the point of tripping. Ramona did end up falling over, only for Daisy to round back, pick her up, and sprint ahead. Seconds later, all of their allotted time had elapsed. The factory erupted in a fiery, electrical explosion made all the worse by the contents still inside of it. Each of the Kruna got knocked off of their feet with the booming tremor the explosion caused, but they had by then gotten themselves out of range of most of the danger. A round of shock waves emitted from the flaming destruction and bumped the Kruna further away.

Even after the initial outburst, explosions continued going off in and around whatever still stood of the factory. After staggering to their feet, the Kruna resumed their flight from the scene. Workers and

robots from neighboring buildings and structures flooded in to try and quell the growing chaos just as the Kruna cleared themselves out of their scope of notice and into the open field beyond the industrial zone. For a short while, the Kruna slowed to a stop and gazed at the towering, unsettled inferno still going off and rocking the area with its explosions.

"Do you think he made it out?" Ramona murmured.

Daisy transformed back to normal, shaking her head. "No."

"Sad," Athelstan mumbled. "He really didn't want to go..."

"Um, no," said Neva. "Not sad. He still tried to take us out in the process. We just escaped because we had Daisy."

"That's literally the only reason," said Bowser.

"And if that Diamond Fist wasn't already made, not even then," said Athelstan. "It would've taken too long otherwise."

"What kind of people are we dealing with here?" murmured Daisy. "It's obvious now that they hate elemental wielding...but to this extent? Why are they so hellbent on getting rid of it?"

"Because they think we suck and we're bad," said Neva.

"Yeah, but why?" said Daisy.

"I don't know what the reasoning behind it is, but Diamond City is MAE-controlled," said Ramona. "And Marut is in Diamond City, and, and Commander Malakai sent out that order against elemental wielders..."

Daisy nodded. "That's our next destination, for sure, before anywhere else."

"But how?" asked Neva. "Our Bullet Blitzer is junked somewhere way back in the other direction."

"Simple," said Daisy. "We find an unmanned aircraft and then get either Bowser or Athelstan to pilot it. Should be easy to find one

without raising alarm with as many people as there are worried about that factory."

"I like how you said to get either Bowser or me to pilot it," Athelstan commented.

"That's a testament to your flying skills, dude," said Daisy.

Chapter XV

Diamond City Rumble!:

The chrome-plated, futuristic anti-gravity aircraft the Kruna Yura used to return to the Mushroom Kingdom provided plenty of difficulty for both Bowser and Athelstan to handle. Luckily for them, they learned upon arriving back at Toad Town that some of Bowser's aids had returned the Koopa Cruiser to his palace. That meant that the next day after a night of restless sleep, the Kruna could set out for MAE Diamond City in the Koopa Cruiser.

Their flight southeast to the southernmost east of the northwestern quadrant of the world brought them past Maralah and to the bottom of a peninsula branching off from the mainland. Diamond City existed on an island just off of the peninsula, and a long, sturdy bridge of roughly a mile or two connected the mainland with Diamond City. Out of precaution, Bowser picked out an area with ample trees near the start of the bridge to park the Koopa Cruiser in and keep it concealed and protected during their crusade through the MAE-controlled territory for their air teammate.

The Kruna only had to concern themselves with the traffic and the occasional Patrol Bot on their trek across the bridge. True to Commander Malakai's word, the Patrol Bots the Kruna encountered recognized them immediately and turned hostile without hesitation. Dealing with a few scattered along the length of the bridge was a simple, easy task; but confronting a city's worth of robotic enforcement would no doubt present them with a mission of considerable difficulty made more apparent upon nearing Diamond City itself and noticing its expansive size in greater detail.

"I feel like we're under-prepared for this," said Ramona.

"Pfft – yeah, okay," said Daisy. "We'll be fine; especially once we find Marut."

"And we've got all the recovery items we need," said Athelstan.

"I need a new Alkemei thing," grumbled Neva. "This Hien's been coming up useless against all this mechanical junk."

"Yeah, the Hien's a pretty awesome one," said Athelstan. "But it doesn't seem very practical for what we're facing if they've given you nothing to copy."

"Couldn't you have copied one of our moves?" asked Bowser.

"I could have," said Neva. "But why should I copy any of your techniques when you're already here to do it? And I'd have to use up a huge chunk of power too just to do so? I should copy something we don't have. But all these technology enemies are giving me nothing."

"Maybe we can get you a new one," said Daisy. "Not now, but...Ramona's can detect other ones, so if hers picks up on something, we could sidetrack for it. But right now, our focus is on Marut. Him not answering any of the calls we've made is far from a good thing. So keep your senses alert so you can pick up his energy signature as quick as possible."

Much of the afternoon and early evening in MAE Diamond City involved countless encounters with MAE personnel and robots, all of whom ultimately failed in apprehending the five elemental wielders but still showed the utmost hostility and aggression towards them. It seemed as though no matter how many enemies the Kruna cut through, more waited or charged at them a few blocks down. The new Titan Force D-Series Restrainers, specialized robots twice as large and armored as standard Patrol Bots and armed with considerably more powerful electrical charge to shuttle into their melee clubs and long-range shoulder Shock Blasters, gave the Kruna extra trouble and headaches throughout the day.

MAE had no shortage of numbers in their ranks; but after battling through dozens of squads, the retaliation against the Kruna halted altogether. Though the Kruna expected an uptick in security when they entered Diamond City's inner regions, they instead noticed a complete drop-off altogether. MAE Diamond City's inhabitants still

gave them mean glares and scowls as they passed by regardless.

So preoccupied with resisting MAE defenders, the Kruna had little opportunity to take in their surroundings and the Diamond City environment itself. Only now with the cease in violence did the Kruna get to focus on and analyze their current location. The heavily built up and flashy, festive metropolis harbored riches, copious party spots, casinos, MAE's latest in tech and innovations, a rainbow of colors, and – maybe more than anything else – traffic. However, issues with congestion throughout the streets only held true for the people who had yet to upgrade to the flying karts and vehicles shooting through pathways overhead among the towers and building tops. The slick, silky apparel and smart gadgets many passersby possessed only added to the alien feel the environment inspired within the Kruna and singled them out among the crowd in the process.

"I'm starting to think I'd rather fend off attacks instead of have to deal with angry stares," mumbled Athelstan.

"Never mind them," said Bowser. "It's all just a propaganda stunt MAE's governmental body has enforced on them. They don't know any better. Look."

After the Kruna crossed a street, they glanced in the direction Bowser gestured in. An electronic billboard stood over a hotel building, showing a picture of winged MAE citizens flying into the clouds while elemental wielders fell into a dark red pit of fire. In bold text underneath the image, a caption read, "KEEP OUR WORLD SAFE. ELEMENTAL WIELDING DOES NOT BELONG IN SOCIETY."

"Okay, now that's just wrong in so many ways," said Athelstan.

"Guys, listen to this," said Ramona, waving the Kruna over to a set of TVs in a store's display window. They gathered around their light wielder teammate and saw a toad news anchor in a MAE-designed studio.

"... And so because of the ban on elemental wielding, all elemental wielders across all MAE states and territories are now being

apprehended," the news anchor said. "MAE forces are promptly dealing with any uprisings and rebellious behaviors as we speak, and all wielders are now being transported to local detainment facilities in each respective district. For MAE Diamond City, we advise against travel through the northeastern sector, for that is where our MAE forces are sending arrested elemental wielders; and because of the unpredictable and dangerous nature of wielders, avoiding that region for much of the day unless absolutely necessary is highly recommended. If you encounter any wielder, do your best to avoid confronting or provoking them. MAE law enforcement will track them down. They can't run forever."

A blue Pianta walked up behind the Kruna. "You thinking of stealing those?"

"Uh, no?" Daisy said, raising an eyebrow. "Why would we?"

The Pianta gave them a suspicious look and continued on his way down the sidewalk. As the Kruna watched him leave, the TVs went to a commercial break. "MDCN News at 5 is sponsored by Dedede Loans!" a narrator said through the TV. "If you need a loan, you've got a friend in Dedede! Dedede Loans! Pay us back – or else! Star Wolf: Infinite! The next generation in intergalactic combat, only for PlayerHUD Ultra! Rated 'M' for Mechanized! And; Eggman Land! Embark on the best vacation of your life! Delights that will create lasting memories! Amusement with endless possibilities!"

"I take it we won't get a chance to stop by Eggman Land, huh?" Ramona mumbled.

"You guys are going to jail," a young human girl hissed at the Kruna as she and her dad passed them.

"Don't irritate *those* people," the girl's father said, hurrying her along. "They could easily kill us if they wanted to. Let MAE deal with them."

"What do you mean ' *those people,'* ya punk?!" Neva barked at the man and girl. Frightened, the father pushed his daughter away as fast as he could. He kept looking back, as if expecting the Kruna to chase after him.

"That's not helping, Neva," said Daisy. "Bowser, why are you laughing?"

"It's the fact that someone is actually scared of this puny girl right here, that's why!" Bowser replied, pointing his thumb at Neva.

"Hey, I can make you scared too, fire-spitter!" Neva snapped.

"I'd love to know how the dynamic between you and Andrew worked out," said Athelstan.

Neva blushed and scowled. "The dynamic is my foot up your ass! Now let's hurry up and get Marut already!"

"Right – I guess we head northeast to that detainment facility," said Daisy. "I have a feeling that going by Wario Ware Inc. HQ would just waste time at this point."

"Gotta bust Marut out of jail," said Athelstan. "That sounds pretty weird."

"There they are!" a MAE Patrol Bot called out ahead of the Kruna. By the time the Kruna turned around to face the robot that had shouted, it charged at them with several officers and other Patrol Bots following behind it.

"And we're back to this now," Bowser said, he and the other Kruna readying themselves for battle.

Many more rounds of brawls and scuffles against MAE squadrons littered the Kruna's path to MAE Diamond City's northeast sector. The density of MAE's law enforcement presence reached its peak when the Kruna entered the vicinity of the Diamond City State Correctional Institution. DCSCI was built in a more industrialized location of Diamond City, though its bright and colorful appearance maintained the overall aesthetic theme spread throughout the metropolis.

Before anyone else could spot and engage them, the Kruna sprinted across the street and onto DCSCI's wide, long lawn on their way to

the ominous set of MAE doors that had become a recurring element of their travels through MAE territories. Interestingly enough, the Kruna did not have to wait for the doors to open. The doors shifted their gears and split apart the instant after the cameras on the frame locked onto the Kruna. No one awaiting in the immediate hallway on the inside, the Kruna rushed in and gave no time to question the easy access granted to them.

Blasting through the guards lining the corridors within filled with occupied prison cells, the Kruna sped in the direction they sensed the potent energy signature they believed to be Marut. All along the way, they saw both elemental wielders and non-elemental wielders – the non-wielders likely having already been in custody prior to the order going out to arrest wielders. However, the Kruna did not see Marut anywhere on the first three floors. It took a full ascension up the stairs through the building complex to the top fourth floor to find the Kruna Yura of Air behind bars – and with Wario, for some reason.

Because of his apparel – a biker suit somewhat similar to Wario's except in dark green, sky blue, silver, and lime green rather than Wario's dark blue, denim blue, pink, and yellow – the Kruna actually rushed past the black-haired, brown-eyed air wielder at first. But Marut recognized them, so he called out to them before they got too far away. "Yo! DUDES! OVER HERE!"

Daisy gasped and turned to rush back. "Marut!"

"Holy crap!" Marut hollered. "I can't believe you're here! What are you even doing in Diamond City?!"

"Why didn't you answer any of our calls?" asked Daisy.

"I got busy with Wario Ware stuff," said Marut. "I was gonna call back when I wasn't busy; but then the next thing I know, all the wielders here started getting arrested because of some special order. And then I got caught off guard by those robots right when I tried to leave, so I've been in here all day. Man, you guys have great timing!"

"Why's Wario in there with you?" asked Daisy.

"Those idiots said I was some 'accomplice' or something!" Wario grumbled, walking up to the bars from the bench he was sitting on. "So this green string bean here got me locked up with him! And after I had given him paid leave too!"

"Okay! I get it," muttered Marut. "I already said I was sorry a bunch of times now!"

"Hey, are you guys gonna bust us out or what?" Wario barked. "I see brown man over here waving his hammer at us."

"Of course we'll get you out," said Daisy. "What do ya think we came here for?"

"I don't know – you ran past us and would've kept going if Marut hadn't have yelled!" Wario replied.

"Because we didn't see you or recognize Marut," said Daisy.

"The hell's up with the clown outfit?" asked Bowser.

"It's far from some clown getup!" Wario snapped. "That's his reward for rising to project head of senior development at Wario Ware Inc.! Only high-ranking employees get to have such a uniform!"

Athelstan frowned as he lowered his hammer. "Yup, I didn't think I could bend these bars with as little as I've been able to control of MAE's metal."

"Hey, that's fine," said Daisy. "Let's just smash 'em out!"

"Can't let you do that, Kruna Yura," a suave voice called out from further up the hall.

The Kruna and Wario looked in the direction of the new voice and saw a tall, white Shy Guy in MAE commander uniform march their way. The Shy Guy had an array of ranged weapons strapped to his back, and he already had a pistol-like gun in each hand. Several MAE Patrol Bots marched in from the intersection behind him.

"Is that a MAE commander?" asked Ramona. "Did he know we were coming here?"

"How?" asked Neva.

"That one in green is a member of your team, is he not?" asked the commander. "Yes, I was hoping you would be on your way here to get him. Anticipating, I was as well. As some of the most dangerous threats to MAE and to the world, I – the great and admirable Commander Yulin – had to confront you in person and take you out myself!"

"Take us out?" said Daisy. "You're more likely to get take out from the restaurant across the street."

"Oh, I know what you are capable of," said Commander Yulin. "And I am not impressed. Yes, you had some *seemingly* impressive heroics over in Sarasaland last autumn. However, I wonder if they were nothing more than a staged front designed to make you look good in the public eye! Otherwise, you wouldn't be trying to assault and assassinate critical MAE personnel! True villains at heart, you elemental wielders are!"

"You guys better stop with this thinking that we're bad!" Neva yelled. "It's totally annoying!"

"And, more importantly, false!" added Athelstan.

"Your persuasion methods are weak and without any foundation," said Commander Yulin. "Surrender peacefully, and you will be restrained and imprisoned without experiencing undue harm."

"Yeah, no," Daisy said. "How about we free all the elemental wielders and our two friends here, and you just fall over and lose? Or, we can beat you into the ground too."

"If you want to free anyone, you'll have to get this from me," Commander Yulin said, holding up a thick keychain.

"For what?" snapped Daisy. "We can just smash them out!"

Commander Yulin let out a haughty laugh. "HAH! If you really believe you can smash through MAE-brand, official Triple Star Grade certified, hybrid titanium tungsten-"

Athelstan's Odina-powered, double-strength hammer swing wrecked through Marut and Wario's cell bars, freeing them. "Smashed through."

Commander Yulin grumbled and took aim with his handguns. Rather than Marut and Wario coming out of the cell, the other Kruna ducked into it. Stun gun shots and pulse bullets soared past their cell and continued flying by for several moments after the Kruna had taken cover.

"Don't rush in after them!" the Kruna and Wario heard Commander Yulin shout. "They'll use that to their advantage and catch you by surprise. Just keep shooting and get them when they try to counter."

"Dudes, what do we do?" Marut said in panic.

"The way I see it, we have to somehow attack while we're in here," said Bowser. "That means we'd have to curve attacks around the cell frame at a right angle and into the hallway."

"The offer to surrender is still viable!" Commander Yulin shouted. "Either way, I will sleep well knowing that I captured-slash-eliminated some of the most potent elemental wielders around!"

"How are we even supposed to curve anything like that?" snapped Neva.

"Hold on – let's think combinations!" said Ramona. "What do we have to use? Marut, what tools do you have?"

"I still have my Gust Boomerangs," said Marut, pulling off a sword from his back. "And I also got this rad Energized Air Saber that glows a sick neon light blue! Oh, and I also picked up a neat Energized Aero Yo-yo that lights up the same color too! It looks wicked in the dark-"

"I'm surprised they didn't confiscate those," said Bowser.

"Not like they were any help in busting out," said Wario.

Daisy raised an eyebrow at the electric shots still shooting past their cell. "Do those guys ever run out of ammo?"

"Battery operated guns," said Wario. "They work on charge, not physical ammo. I once saw one of those robots shooting for almost three hours straight."

"Well damn, man," said Neva. "So we're gonna be stuck here for three hours?"

"That's if they don't advance towards us," said Athelstan.

Bowser grimaced. "But Yulin specifically told them to just keep shooting and to not advance; which sucks because that could have made things a lot easier for us in regards to retaliating."

"Wait, this is actually good because we have time to try and come up with something," said Daisy. "They're just trying to pressure us out, so-"

A harsh streak of thicker, higher voltage electrical bullets sizzled through the air in front of the entrance to their cell. The other bullet streams increased in size and density as well. One large burst even zapped with enough of a slanted trajectory to sneak into the cell at an angle and shock some of the cell's gate and wall.

"Those guys are *not* trying to spend three hours here doing this," said Athelstan.

"Alright – Ramona said something about combinations, so let's try that route," Daisy suggested. "We've got everything here but water and shadow."

Athelstan held out his hammer. "I've got something. Neva, you gotta frost me for this. I need the extra hardness for this double-strength swing."

Commander Yulin and his Patrol Bots heard a loud crashing sound moments later, and massive puffs of rubble pumped out of the cell the Kruna had ducked into. Alarmed, the MAE commander and robots halted their fire and glanced at one another in confusion. Exercising extra caution, Commander Yulin eased towards the cell. The robots followed his lead.

Upon arriving at the broken entrance, Commander Yulin and the

Patrol Bots did not see the Kruna or Wario. Instead, they saw a huge, gaping hole in the center of the cell's floor. They rushed inside, flustered in their frantic search for their targets. But then, a fierce uprising of light, ice, fire, and air battered and blitzed them. The surprise attack from the cell on the level directly below them trashed the Patrol Bots and took a sizable chunk out of Commander Yulin's health.

"That could not have worked out any better," Athelstan said, shaking ice remains off of his hammer.

"It could have if we had killed that commander," grumbled Neva.

"What in the hell is going on here?" a koopa sitting on the cell's bottom bed said. His Monty Mole cellmate gave the Kruna and Wario odd looks as well.

Commander Yulin scowled and threw his hand guns away, now pulling out an automatic rifle and a machine gun. "I'll just gun you down right where you stand!"

"Uh-oh!" Ramona cried, swiping her sword up. A light dome formed overhead of the Kruna and Wario, shielding them from the electric pounding Commander Yulin laid down. Under Ramona's protection, Athelstan made a double-strength hammer swing at that cell's iron bar doors. The Kruna and Wario rushed out of the cell, Ramona at the rear to continue providing defense. Irritated, Commander Yulin leapt down into the cell and started to chase after the escapees. The two cellmates and their now opened doors gave him reason to pause and point his weapons at them.

"Don't you two even *think* about trying to escape!" Commander Yulin hissed, backing out of the cell. Once into the hallway, he turned and entered a speedy, gun-totting sprint for the Kruna and Wario.

Further up the hall, the Kruna and Wario turned down another corridor and kept up their pace. Whenever any of them looked back, they could see electric bolts scything through the air and zapping the walls. Several shots also snuck past other cell bars that the fleeing group passed, resulting a few times in some unwanted collateral harm to other inmates.

"The next time we round a corner, somebody send a blast back!" Bowser yelled out as the Kruna and Wario turned down another hall.

"So, right now!" Neva said, twisting around and aiming her rifle behind the group. Ramona lifted her light shield up long enough for Neva to get off a shot the instant Commander Yulin reached the intersection. However, the commander's honed instincts sent him into a roll through which he maintained his rate of fire. As a result, Ramona had to put the shield back down before Neva could shoot again.

"I hope you've had fun with your petty jailbreak!" Commander Yulin yelled. "But the games are over now, for it's time to kick in a *lethal* power-up!"

The shots coming out of Commander Yulin's guns escalated in voltage and density to a point where Ramona's light shield now shook with each bullet impact. Just as the Kruna and Wario reached a corner, Ramona's light shield broke under the electric bullet barrage. As her light shattered and dispersed, she fell to a skid on her rear end and got her Sun Shield up to at least protect herself; for as long as it took Commander Yulin to reach her, that is.

"No, Ramona!" Daisy called out, reversing direction.

Just when Commander Yulin closed in on Ramona, Daisy dove at her and grabbed her in a tumble down the opposite hall. Since the two rolled to a tangled stop with Daisy on top of Ramona, Commander Yulin aimed his guns at the vulnerable Kruna rather than attack the main group. Luckily, Marut whipped his Energized Aero Yo-yo at the MAE Commander and latched it onto his machine gun. With a hard yank, Marut threw the commander off balance and ripped the machine gun free from his grasp.

Right when Commander Yulin straightened himself out, Marut soared at him through the power of his Alkemei Furaito, Pendant of Flight, in a tackle that zipped them both through the long hallway and disarmed the commander of his rifle. Marut then cut his flight off in an abrupt stop to a still hover over the floor, but Commander Yulin maintained all the momentum and flew to a haphazard crash against a wall.

"Alright!" Marut cheered, setting his feet on the floor. The very next instant, Wario came running at him and brushed past him. "Hey, what-"

It took a while for Commander Yulin to roll over and push himself to his knees after such a collision; but when he did, he noticed a pair of pointy feet step in front of him. Commander Yulin peered up and saw Wario staring down with a frown that looked like a smirk.

"Do you mind not standing so close," hissed Commander Yulin. "You reek of onions, and your breath smells of garlic-"

The MAE Commander felt Wario grab him by his neck and yank him up off of the ground. Though a little shorter than him, Wario still managed to lift Commander Yulin up to a point where only his toes barely touched the floor. By now, the other Kruna had all backtracked to where Wario and the MAE Commander were. Commander Yulin scowled and made a few unsuccessful attempts to wriggle free before reaching around his back to pull out an electric shotgun that he pointed at Wario's bulbous nose.

"Wario! Put him down!" Daisy screamed. "He'll blow your face off!"

With a grunt and a low grumble, Wario set the commander back down and released his hold on his neck. Commander Yulin spent the next several moments hunched over and panting – until Wario slammed a punch in his gut that nearly knocked him comatose. Brought to his knees, Commander Yulin seemed to have been defeated.

"Yeah! Pure muscle, baby!" Wario taunted, flexing his biceps. "The finishers! Lefty and righty! Pain and punishment! Guts and glory!"

"I was gonna say 'nice,' but then he went overboard there," said Daisy.

"For someone only a few inches taller than Neva, he's got a ton of strength," said Athelstan. "That hit echoed!"

Athelstan then felt a foot go in the back of one of his legs and almost fell over as a result. Shamelessly, Neva stepped ahead of the group.

She did not so much as look at Athelstan.

"Hey, what was that for?" Athelstan said. "I didn't mean anything by it!"

"I still need someone to hit since Shady's not here," said Neva.

Ramona frowned. "That's not how it works..."

"Ha-hah! Fools!" Commander Yulin exclaimed, still panting. "This is FAR from over!"

Commander Yulin then got his shotgun up and aimed at Wario, who reacted with a raise of both of his hands. One hand went for the shotgun head and grabbed it just as Yulin pressed the trigger. The lethal electric blast that came out went through Wario and zapped him with immense force, possibly more than enough force to kill someone. But then Wario grabbed onto Commander Yulin's shoulder with his free hand, and what would have been a fatal shock to Wario instead transferred through his body and into the MAE commander. Wario removed his hand from the shotgun and held onto Commander Yulin until all of the shock had run its course. By the time Wario let go, Commander Yulin was nothing more than a limp, barely standing sack of soft, toneless gelatin.

"Oh man! That hurt!" Wario hollered, all of the Kruna aside from Bowser and Marut staring at him in utter stupefaction. "What?"

"That hurt?" mumbled Neva. "That's it? THAT'S IT?!"

"Oh, yeah!" Marut replied. "This dude's super tough! Like, even tougher than Bowser and Athelstan! He can withstand some crazy stuff!"

"But then he just redirected that electricity back at Commander Yulin!" said Ramona.

"Let's just say that I'm *highly adaptable* ," Wario answered, shoving Commander Yulin over. "And this guy's highly dead."

"Wait...is he?" Daisy asked.

"He's not moving," Ramona murmured. "And it doesn't look like he's breathing. He just seems kind of...frozen."

"Frozen in a state of *shock!* "Wario bellowed with laughter.

"It's not funny, dude!" Daisy snapped. "Killing him was bad enough, but MAE's gonna hold that against all of us! Including you! So *you'll* be having issues with MAE too once we get you out of here!"

"More than you already do," added Bowser. "And MAE can manipulate this to make us all look worse to the rest of the world."

"Yeah, but they're the bad guys in all of this, right?" said Wario. "Killing a bad guy won't make me look bad."

"But the world doesn't know that MAE is bad," said Bowser. "MAE is benign to them. So until we either take down MAE or figure out and show the world what MAE is really up to, we're seen as the aggressors."

"Eh, just drop me off in Mushroom Kingdom," said Wario. "I'll hide out there 'til this all blows over."

"No plans on helping us out, huh?" said Daisy.

"Of course not!" Wario replied. "You guys play hero! I've got to keep myself in one piece to run a business, you know!"

"Alright, let's just get the other elemental wielders out of here," Daisy said, glancing around at the filled cells.

"We can't," said Bowser. "If we do, MAE will recapture them. It's better and safer if they just wait things out in here until MAE is no more. I'd hate to find out what would happen to them if they got captured again and then faced added penalty for escape."

"What about freeing them and banding everyone together to rally against MAE?" asked Marut.

"No! No," said Bowser. "That's automatic, guaranteed war and chaos on a worldwide scale; and that's the last thing we need right now, especially considering how bad elemental wielders and us in

particular already look because of MAE. In that scenario, we'd have the whole world against us-"

"Why, hello there," a gentle, feminine voice said. "Looks like I've caught up to you. You've been making quite the ruckus as of late, haven't you?"

The Kruna Yura and Wario turned around to see a newcomer walking towards them; a brown-haired, green-eyed, and fair-skinned lady. Unlike the white, gray, blue, brown, and gold other MAE commanders wore, this new commander appeared in an all-navy ensemble with aqua blue and gold trim. She also had even more MAE representation on her uniform than the other commanders that the Kruna had seen so far, and her thin gold scarf had the MAE emblem's silhouette on both of its ends.

The woman stopped in her tracks when she neared the Kruna and Wario, her gaze dropping to their feet and the corpse of Commander Yulin behind them. Her otherwise pleasant expression turned grim and anguished. For as delicate as her facial features were, she found a way to twist them into something of repressed fury leaking to the surface.

"Sickening," the woman murmured. "At some point, you damned elemental wielders need to know when to stop."

Chapter XVI

Robotic Harpy Throwdown:

The Kruna Yura and Wario stood in a wide hall on the third floor of Diamond City State Correctional Institution, with a slender and uniquely uniformed MAE commander staring them down. The commander showed signs of great anger and distress that she tried her hardest to keep as subdued as possible. Daisy wondered if the others could sense the same energy signature she was sensing coming from the commander, a notable characteristic of the new arrival considering the low or insignificant signatures the previous three MAE commanders radiated.

"I saw your handiwork firsthand when I visited Sunset Hill this morning," the navy-blue-outfitted MAE commander said. "You're quite the chaotic pests, hellbent on destruction and death instead of helping to progress our world forward into an ascended age. I will never understand the selfish reasoning behind the crimes your people commit. But one thing I do know is that you're all the same. Just a bunch of barbarians who do whatever they want; steal, murder, bully, ruin, devastate... You'll all be put in your place soon. Every single one of your kind."

"Who *are* you people *?* " said Daisy. "Are you seriously doing this all because of a few bad elemental wielders?"

"Because of every elemental wielder," said the MAE commander. "You're all a plague and a menace to society and peace."

"Sweeping overgeneralization," said Bowser. "What're you hoping your judgmental prejudice will accomplish?"

"Long overdue payback," the commander said. "For the other commanders, for all of MAE, and for the whole world, we are setting things right and correcting the wrongs. My fellow Learners and I have experienced egregious sufferings, all as a result of your kind. Three of them are now dead specifically because of you Kruna. You people own a perverted sense of judgment. Or perhaps you derive

enjoyment out of your vices?"

The MAE commander took out a remote control and pushed several buttons as Daisy lashed out with a scathing response. "What vices? You're the ones going around and taking over nations against their will – and for what? Because a few elemental wielders gone bad make you hate all of us? Look, I'm sorry that you've had a bad experience or two with them, but that doesn't give you any right to say that the world would be better off without them!"

"And it certainly doesn't mean that you can start some genocide," added Ramona.

With a dark frown, the commander responded in a bitterly low tone. "I died because of you."

"What..." Daisy mumbled. "Wha...who are you?!"

Part of the ceiling behind the MAE commander collapsed and crumbled to pieces. The waning evening sunlight shined through as parts of the fourth floor compacted around the area where the third floor ceiling had caved in. As destruction and carnage behind the commander flattened unfortunate elemental wielder prisoners and tore into the building's infrastructure, a colossal robotic hawk burst through the gap and landed in the hallway. A clear hatch in the shiny white and red hawk's head opened up, revealing a seat and a dashboard with a yoke and other control mechanisms.

"You actually care to know my name?" asked the MAE commander. "Fine, Miss Daisy Sarasa. I am Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss. 'Chrissy' spares everyone many syllables over the course of their time interacting with me. You won't have to worry about that, however."

Chrissy's gold boots lit up with a neon blue, and she entered the air in a hover seconds later. She then floated towards the giant hawk mech behind her and sat herself down in its hatch. The Kruna and Wario had to back away as more of the upper floor above and roof collapsed inward. Soon, their entire section of the building had imploded into a ceiling-less mess of rubble.

"You outdated relics and your primitive arts need to be conditioned," said Chrissy. "I will teach you what is proper and acceptable for today's new age. This Gallance Hawk AAR will provide incentive. And if you refuse to adapt, then perish along with your power-mad practices."

The Gallance Hawk flapped its clawed wings and charged the circular light portions spread out on the sides of either limb. At full charge, lasers came firing out in random directions. As the Gallance Hawk pumped its wings up and down, the lasers changed and adapted their trajectory. Just about everyone – imprisoned beings included – got singed from the scorching, animated beams.

Before the Kruna or Wario could retaliate in any way, the Gallance Hawk smacked its wings on the floor with its turbines directed at them. The shock the hit made jolted them off of their feet, and the turbo that Chrissy shuttled through the hawk mech's turbines lifted them skyward and blew them out of the hallway. All seven of them landed on the remains of the prison's roof.

"Now, you're exposed," Chrissy projected through her mech's speakers. The Gallance Hawk bolted off of the floor and entered the air. It flew in a circular pattern around the DCSCI roof through the power of its wings and special anti-gravity devices. Her and her mech flashed through twilight's shadows, their relatively silent flying difficult to track by ear. However, Bowser's extra focus through his Pendant of Omnidirectional Vision ensured that the Gallance Hawk would stay in sight.

The Alkemei Kracielle also alerted Bowser to the rockets that burst out of the Gallance Hawk's back. "We've got missiles coming at us!" he yelled.

Marut took out his Gust Boomerangs and made a short hop off of the roof that he flowed into a Dome Rotation. The rockets that curved at the Kruna and Wario instead met a defending column of cyclonic air that diverted them all away. Once the Dome Rotation had completed its defensive role, Marut dispelled it and set his feet back on the roof.

Bowser countered Chrissy's rockets with his Tavado blast. Such a

similarly-styled attack to the rockets that Chrissy had launched, Bowser's flaming torpedoes scattered on their way towards their mobile target. Unfortunately, the Tavado's many segments closed in on an area just behind the Gallance Hawk. The hawk mech experienced only minimal splash damage.

"That's a fast-moving robot," said Daisy.

"Actually, that *should* be a mech," said Athelstan. "A mech is human-piloted. A robot is typically automated or remote-controlled...unless this is actually both?"

Daisy sucked her teeth. "Whatever."

More lasers raced out from the Gallance Hawk's wings, their movement again proving hard to evade and anticipate. Daisy, Wario, Athelstan, Ramona, and Neva all endured laser strikes that Bowser and Marut had the luck to avoid. Immediately after the lasers had run their course, Chrissy angled her Gallance Hawk at DCSCI's roof and rushed at it. The aerial tackle she executed clipped Bowser and Athelstan along with a protruding portion of the roof's structure. Everyone else there had went prone and let the hawk mech pass by overhead. As they scrambled to their feet, Athelstan hurled a debris boulder at the Gallance Hawk and scored a hit on its back that made it wobble in the air for a little while before it turned and aimed its head at the group a second time.

"You're not avoiding Wyvern Slash," Chrissy taunted, propelling her mech forward.

The Gallance Hawk's wing claws glowed with a bright neon azure light as it sped at the Kruna. Upon nearing them, it entered a barrel roll twist and swiped its claws at its targets. Athelstan, Neva, Marut, and Wario all hit the ground after suffering a painful slashing of mechanical talons. Chrissy boosted her mech ahead and directed it into a loop that set up for another Wyvern Slash dive. This time however, Bowser knocked the mech off course when he threw himself at its body in his Whirling Fortress rush attack. Following his successful hit, the Kruna of Fire landed back in the exposed third floor hallway; but he found a way to jump across and up some makeshift platforms in order to rejoin his teammates on the roof.

"That hurt *way* too much," Neva groaned, down on her side.

Daisy rushed to Neva and helped her up, providing a recovery Mushroom. "Come on, Neva. Stay strong. I'm here with you."

Chrissy spun her Gallance Hawk out of its aerial tumble and regained stability, its wings releasing a wicked gust that forced back the Kruna and Wario. Anything else in the area loose and unanchored also got shuffled around. A compartment in the Gallance Hawk's belly opened up when Chrissy soared over the Kruna, through which a slew of electrical bombs fell out. Bowser, Marut, and Ramona blasted fire, air, and light up to counter the bombs, setting off midair explosions that lit up the darkening evening skies throughout the whole northeastern section of MAE Diamond City. The one bomb that got through, Marut blew a gust of his own at to direct it off the side of the roof.

"I'm finding myself pretty useless in this fight so far," Daisy said when Neva stood up. "You think you can get your aim on that cockpit?"

"On that thing's head?" Neva said. "Oh, sure. That's more than big enough. I just have to get shots off when she's not moving around."

When Chrissy redirected her Gallance Hawk, she released more rockets at the Kruna. That short period of stationary time gave Neva an opportunity with her Freeze Coil Sniper right away. Once she got her scope and laser sight on the Gallance Hawk's cockpit, she shot off multiple rounds of ice bullets. Her precision efforts scored a wealth of damage on the Gallance Hawk's cockpit and its rider, but the rockets Chrissy sent their way prevented Neva from executing any further offensive. She instead shot at the incoming missiles, as did Bowser and Ramona. All rockets blew up before even reaching the Kruna.

Just as Marut took out his Energized Aero Yo-yo and sparked lightning through it, the claws on the Gallance Hawk's wings extended outward. Chrissy eased her flying mech closer to the group and shot out its claws at them. Both Daisy and Ramona got caught and could not wriggle free from the hawk's grasp – until Wario leapt at the claw holding Daisy right as it began to retract.

Executing a Ground Pound on it, Wario smashed Daisy free from the claw and sent it into a fritz. Athelstan knocked Ramona free after bashing his hammer onto the claw that held her. Both extendable claws retracted to their original position, electricity leaking outward as a result of the damage sustained. Chrissy scowled at the group and backed her Gallance Hawk away from the roof while Daisy and Ramona picked themselves up from their fall, which made the whip Marut improvised with his lightning-laced yo-yo miss the mech.

"Thanks for the save," Daisy said to Wario.

"You shouldn't've even got caught in the first place!" Wario shouted. "I thought you were supposed to be pros!"

"Nobody's perfect," said Bowser.

Marut set up to sling his yo-yo again, and Neva centered her aim on the Gallance Hawk cockpit as well as she could. Bowser and Ramona charged elementals through their respective swords, all while Athelstan pulled a piece of stone-metal up from below to chuck. The best Daisy could do was ready her comparatively short-range Seismic Wave and hope Chrissy would veer somewhere near enough.

Chrissy did just the opposite, instead shooting more lasers and missiles. The lasers forced everyone to abruptly cancel their mounting offensive and revert to elemental-boosted blocking rather than try to dodge the fairly unpredictable shots. That left minimal time to do much of anything against the incoming rockets – minimal time for everyone except Daisy, who dashed and jumped at one missile, grabbed it, threw it off in another direction, and then did the same with the other six. The combination of blazing speed and instantaneous reaction time amazed and stunned everyone, Chrissy included. But after flipping the last rocket into the distance, Daisy landed back on the roof as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"D-Daisy..." Ramona stammered. "Wh-what, how, d-did you-"

"You need to stop doing stuff like that!" Neva screamed.

"Stuff like what?" said Daisy. "Helping the team out? Geez. Be grateful I did something."

"No, Daisy – *how* did you just do all of that?" asked Bowser. "And at that speed?"

"I'm surrounded by freaks!" Wario hollered.

"I don't know," said Daisy. "How was I supposed to do that? I wasn't moving any faster than I have been, and those rockets weren't moving that fast."

"They were moving fast enough!" snapped Neva. "And you sure didn't move anywhere near that quick when that claw grabbed you two seconds ago!"

"And you did *not* have a ton of time to react either!" Athelstan replied. "That was something I'd expect from Marut! Or any air wielder for that matter! Not an *earth* wielder!"

"I don't even know if *I* could've thrown them like that either," said Marut.

Daisy paused and zoned out, pondering what her teammates had said. Chrissy had circled DCSCI again in the opposite direction from her previous flight around the building, her Gallance Hawk's wings now gleaming with a soft blue shine. The air immediately surrounding the hawk mech's wings exhibited visible vibration. All the ice bullet shots Neva fired lost their intended trajectory when they went through the Gallance Hawk's rumble zone, instead zipping to the sides of the mech's cockpit.

"I don't know how you could have possibly engineered the defense for that last sequence," Chrissy said. "It matters not, however. You won't be able to do a thing against Raptor Boost."

The MAE commander lurched her hawk mech closer to the DCSCI roof and set off the Raptor Boost attack she had charging. Gallance Hawk's beak opened, and bursts of shock waves escaped from its throat and wings. In addition to the shock waves, the mech's wings entered a forceful flapping loop that generated supplemental air

blasts. Unable to withstand the combined force of gale gusts and spreading shock waves, the Kruna and Wario all got blown off of the roof and out into one of DCSCI's parking lots. Though flung out of control at first, everyone – aside from Wario and Athelstan – rolled in the air and made controlled landings. Both Wario and Athelstan hit the asphalt in haphazard fashion, but they had the endurance to withstand the awkward endings to their four-story drop.

"We've handled worse, Chrissy!" Daisy called out to the mech now once again circling them overhead. "Trust me – we're Kruna! You and your hawk wouldn't have lasted four seconds against some of the dudes we've faced!"

"Uh-oh," Wario grumbled. "That fall disturbed something..."

"Are you hurt?" asked Ramona.

"No – but I will be if I don't rip one soon!" said Wario. "Stuff shifted around when I hit the ground!"

Daisy grimaced and gritted her teeth. "Don't fart around us! Keep your gas to yourself!"

"We might not have a choice!" Wario said, beginning to look uneasy.

"Yeah, we do!" Daisy yelled. "The choice is either you holding it in or me slugging you in the gut!"

"You are persistent and durable," said Chrissy, her mech charging more power. "But I'll just up the Raptor Boost's intensity. This machine is capable of producing much more potent shock waves."

"Damn, quit moving around!" Neva muttered, sniping at the mobile hawk mech above. Despite not staying stationary, the Gallance Hawk's wings and head built up and accumulated power.

"It's coming out!" said Wario. "I can't hold it in!"

"No – you hold it in!" Daisy barked.

"I can't!" Wario yelled.

"You better!" Daisy yelled right back.

"Okay, yeah, passing gas stinks," said Athelstan. "But it's just a smell. And we're out in open air anyways, so-"

"You do not want to be near him when he lets one loose," said Daisy.

"She's right," said Marut. "You really don't. Like, seriously."

"What do you want me to do?" Wario snapped. "Run away and fart?!"

"I can not believe that this is what's happening right now," grumbled Neva.

"Look – we can't take your stinky gas!" Daisy screamed. "Don't you even dare!"

"Raptor Boost Lv3 now online," said Chrissy. Her Gallance Hawk's wings and head reached a level of glow far greater than that for the first Raptor Boost.

"It's trying to wiggle out!" Wario groaned.

"Ew, no," mumbled Ramona.

"DUDE!" Daisy boomed.

Wario grunted, watery-eyed and grabbing at his rear end. The Gallance Hawk eased closer with its Raptor Boost ready for release, but it appeared as though Wario also had something ready for release. Seeing this, Daisy ran at Wario and grabbed hold of him with the intention of throwing him somewhere just to get him as far away as possible. At the last second and with minimal thinking, Daisy wound up and threw Wario at the incoming hawk mech. Wario sailed upward at the mech towards its cockpit, his body rolling about as he flew.

"This is an odd way of attacking," Chrissy murmured to herself.

Half a second later, Wario bounced off of the cockpit and expelled

all of his contained, explosive flatulence on the Gallance Hawk. While Wario rocketed up and away out of the momentum, his gases seeped through the open areas of the Gallance Hawk's cockpit and worked their way around Chrissy. The MAE commander caught a whiff and gagged, all of her focus taken off of the Kruna and her flight. With Chrissy choking and suffering under the noxious fumes Wario had produced, the Gallance Hawk lost control and careened into a curve at the ground. All Chrissy could think to do was hit the eject button and free herself in an act of self-preservation from the oppressive cloud stuck to the Gallance Hawk.

Wario hit the ground in a tumble while Chrissy twirled into a hover away from the Gallance Hawk, which veered and dropped onto the parking lot pavement without any pilot maintaining a stable flight. A few bounces later, the hawk mech crashed into the side of DCSCI. The towering fireball with electricity and residual Wario-made gases that erupted from the wreckage put an end to the Gallance Hawk AAR, much to Commander Sindograss's dismay.

With everyone else speechless over what had just happened, Athelstan offered up some praise for Daisy. "Nice aim! And arm!"

"Wario...nice fart," Daisy said, helping him up.

"This is not at all how I expected this fight to end," said Ramona.

"Not over yet," Neva said, aiming her rifle at the hovering commander. The rapid fire of ice bullets she unleashed met a hard yellow energy barrier Chrissy projected from her navy blue gauntlets.

"I had grown attached to that mech," Chrissy spat out with a frown. "And I had only just acquired it. I can not believe the fat man's foul flatulence forced me to eject. Make no mistake; you will all perish in holy fire – your rebellious behavior is unacceptable!"

Neva eased off of her rifle, and Chrissy took out her remote controller and pushed three buttons. Moments later while she floated down to the parking lot, a gray and navy blue Spear motorbike drove up from behind her and stopped itself a few steps off to her side. Disbanding the shield she put up, Chrissy got on the bike and

pressed some buttons on the dashboard. Two pairs of wings sprang out from the Spear, and the bike's exhausts folded out more to reveal their rocket-like construction.

"Now what?" grumbled Bowser.

"Nothing," said Chrissy. "Not from me. I'm not dealing with you scum any longer. Dispatching you is a job for a more *familiar* adversary."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Familiar?"

"Really, the only reasonable and sensible thing you can do is surrender and die," said Chrissy. "But I can tell that that's not what any of you will do. If you are really so inclined to oppose MAE, take your grievances to Commander Achlys. You can find him to the north of Delight City at our headquarters, Mount MAE – formerly Rock Rock Mountain to you people. He's the head commander of MAE...and he'll surely set you lot straight."

Chrissy fired up her Spear and accelerated away from the Kruna and Wario. When she pulled into a wheelie, her bike lifted off of the ground and into the air. The Spear's wings kept it stable as its rockets propelled it and its rider far off into the early night sky. Several questions lingered after Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss's departure, as has been the case following every MAE Learner encounter thus far. However, something that Chrissy had said seemed puzzlingly peculiar.

"Does anybody know someone named 'Achlys?' " Daisy asked the group.

No one did.

Chapter XVII

Dark Castle:

Everyone – both the six Kruna Yura and Wario – stayed over at Peach's Castle that night after returning in the Koopa Cruiser from MAE Diamond City. As per Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss's suggestion, the six Kruna Yura would set out for Mount MAE in the morning to confront the head commander of MAE, Maxilla Achlys. But aside from when Athelstan had found his name in a computer file along with those of the other MAE Learners, no one knew anything about Maxilla Achlys or why Chrissy said that he would be a "familiar" foe.

Daisy laid herself down on the bed in one of the guest rooms within Peach's Castle, her mind looking ahead to both the immediate and not-so-near future. They had a chance to end the whole ordeal with MAE relatively quickly when the sun rose for the next day, which meant that they could then refocus their efforts on finding Warra and Andrew. No one had a single clue as to the whereabouts of either one of them, and no one had heard any word from them since their respective disappearances. Something had to have gone wrong for both of them. Otherwise, they would not have been gone for as long as they have been.

I can't imagine what Ramona and Neva must be feeling right about now , Daisy said in thought, sighing. *Andrew...what happened to you? Where are you?*

Her expression then grew more somber. *And Warra...you didn't have to go anywhere... You could have just stayed here... I don't get why you felt you had to leave...*

Memories of both elemental wielders played in her head for a while as she tried to rationalize their disappearances and figure out where they could have possibly gone. Warra and Andrew seemed tremendously troubled in their own distinct ways. To have lost his father, sister, girlfriend, unborn son, and his entire Mekarsari Guard

division in one day gave Warra an extreme burden of guilt that could stay attached to him for the rest of eternity. And on top of that, he never gained any closure from it. If he had gone somewhere to somehow try rectifying it all, he could have returned at any point in time since then whether or not he had succeeded. On his own accord, he had made the decision to leave.

According to Ramona, Andrew had not left under his own free will. It made no sense for him to leave without any warning and not be heard from again. Someone had to have done something to him. Whether through kidnapping or other means – baring the worst-case scenario of death – someone had to have played a part in his disappearance.

Or, he could have done something to himself.

Daisy leapt out of bed, motioning for the door. She exited the room and went down the hall to the room Ramona stayed in for the night. After knocking on the door and calling her name, Daisy got no response back. However, a faint glow of light emanated from under the door.

Why won't she answer? Daisy wondered. *Did she fall asleep with the light on? Maybe I'll just peek in for a sec. I already knocked, so...*

She did not wait very long at all before opening Ramona's door; and for that, she walked in on something alarming. Ramona sat on her bed with just a shirt and underwear on, her Solar Greatsword between her legs, streaks of red running all along her thighs, and her head bowed and facing the floor. Not so much as even looking at Daisy coming in, Ramona cringed and trembled under the searing, burning sensation overwhelming her lower body.

Daisy gasped. "Ramona! You're not supposed to be doing that!"

"I know, but...I just gotta, okay?" cried Ramona. "I just need to do it, so let me do it!"

"That's not what your tool's for!" Daisy said.

"I don't care! Get out!" Ramona screamed. "I know it's bad, but,

just...I'm not doing it as often, okay? What do you want me to do?! Just stop altogether?!"

Daisy closed the door and marched over to Ramona. She yanked the sword away from her, expressing caution in her pull so that she would not cause any extra harm on accident. The sword's blade had splotches of blood all over its edges. While Ramona grabbed herself by her arms, Daisy rested the sword at the other side of the room.

"I'm sorry if I sounded harsh," murmured Daisy. "It just hurts to see you do that when you really shouldn't."

"I'm trying to stop," said Ramona. "It's just...it's not something I can just stop doing in one day. But I swear, I'm trying."

Daisy smiled. "There's no pressure, you know. You're not any less of a person or a friend for doing it, but it's just not healthy."

"I said I'm trying, alright?"

"And that's good enough. Maybe the less often you do it, the less and less you'll want to do it. It could just be something you have to distance yourself from over time. I'm no professional, but that could be a way of getting it out of your system for good."

Ramona did not respond. She looked uncomfortable and frightened.

Daisy sighed but still smiled. "Just promise me you won't use your sword for that again."

Again, Ramona did not reply.

"If you don't, I'm making sure you go to sleep without it nearby," said Daisy. "Or, I'll make sure to be around you whenever you're alone and be with you until you fall asleep. That way, you'll always have a friend around. I can't replace Andrew, but I bet I can be pretty close."

Ramona's expression brightened some. "Do you really mean that? You're really willing to do that?"

"Yup! Sure I am."

"Wow... Thanks, Daisy. I don't know how, but hearing that...has made me feel a bit better about all of this."

"It'll all get fixed soon. I don't know how, but I know we can get things straightened out. And then, everything'll be the way it should be."

"I do hope so..."

"I gotta say though – it's kinda ironic that you don't like pain and blood, but you're still so willing to do that to yourself. I'd think that all we have to deal with against the people we fight would be enough."

Ramona frowned a little, her response delayed as her mouth and eyes began quivering. "Before I started it, I didn't really get why Andrew did it."

Daisy sat down next to Ramona. "Why did he do it?"

"He was really unhappy, deep down," replied Ramona. "How he is on the outside as opposed to how he is on the inside is often like night and day, so no one could really tell most of the time. But...he really hated himself. A lot. Whether it was because of his absent mum or his careless dad or whatever else it could have been, he went so far as to even consider himself a mistake sometimes...as someone who never should have existed... He was so critical of himself too... It was like he was trying to be as good as he could be at things just so that he might feel better about himself or make up for being the worthless mistake he thought he was... So whenever he did poorly on something, felt terrible about himself, was mad at himself, or felt too unhappy and upset to do anything else; that's when he was usually likely to do it."

"Is that something you see in yourself?" asked Daisy.

Ramona shrugged. "Not entirely...but a lot of it...yeah. Him disappearing made me realize some things about myself...and also that him and I being as close as we were wasn't just about friendship."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Us being best friends was, like, a necessity, almost. I don't know – I just think that if he and I weren't together, we both would have been worse off. I'm so scared and timid and unsure of myself, especially now. But he always carried a special sense of confidence about him when he wasn't busy beating himself up. I felt confident whenever I was around him. And he was the first person I ever met when I moved to his town, and he was so nice to me. He is so hard and tough on the outside, but the inside is so soft and delicate and...childlike...just brimming with warmth. I helped protect that about him. I helped to protect him. I was there for him when no one else was, like he was always there for me. But I ultimately failed. He's gone now. I wasn't good enough."

"But it's not like you could have done anything about it in that instance without foresight," said Daisy. "He disappeared. Someone had to have gotten to him and kidnapped him or something without you knowing or being around. You can't blame yourself for something you couldn't do anything about."

A long period of silence followed before Ramona mumbled a hesitant response. "I don't... Maybe...maybe no one took him at all."

Daisy's breathing almost came to a complete stop. "What does that mean?"

"It's tough to explain," Ramona said, shrugging again. "But I remember one day, he had said something to me, when he was stuck in one of his angered stupors..."

Ramona rounded the corner of her high school's front parking lot and descended the outside steps to enter the backyard housing a spacious blacktop, football field, and track. There, she saw Andrew on the blacktop and launching a soccer ball into the side of the school where there were no windows and nothing but brick for his shots to hit. The purple and black-clad shadow wielder noticed Ramona, but he did not stop kicking the soccer ball. He kept shooting at the wall as hard as he could, caught speedy rebounds off the wall, and then powered shots back at the wall again. Ramona stood there and watched him run around and demonstrate ferocious

speed, strength, and aggression in each kick and rebound. Whenever one foot got tired, he favored the other foot. A few times, he smashed his head down on the ball when it came back at him high enough. He kept it up until the ball rebounded out of reach and bounced past him, at which point he ran out of breath and had to stop altogether.

"You chose a Saturday evening to come to school?" Ramona gently asked. "I think five days out of the week is enough."

"You wanted to know where I was," said Andrew. "I told you. Why are you here?"

"Because I knew where you were," she replied.

"Well, you didn't need to come here," he said. "I didn't tell you to or ask for you to."

"If you didn't want me to come, you shouldn't have answered my text."

Andrew grumbled and looked away, but Ramona walked over to him and grabbed one of his wrists. She walked him over to his ball and retrieved it. Ramona then guided Andrew to one of the benches around one curve of the track and sat down with him. Seconds ago, the sun had just ducked behind the trees and the horizon line.

"You've seemed way more mood-swingy than usual," said Ramona. "And you had a pretty bad day yesterday. You practically ignored me all of yesterday too. Again."

"I'm sorry," Andrew murmured, calming down. "I don't know how you even put up with me."

"I'm your best friend, for one," said Ramona. "And you're mine."

"Anyone else would be so much easier to deal with."

"Um...no. I don't know anyone else as well as I do you. So, no, you're pretty easy at this point. Are you a pain sometimes? Sure. But I know what to expect from you by now."

Andrew groaned and glanced elsewhere, as if nothing could hold his attention. He offered no response.

"So what's up with you?" Ramona asked.

"Just...more of the same. I don't know what I'm even still doing here."

"You're right. No one should be at school on a weekend."

That remark drew a laugh and a smile from Andrew, but it was a short and fleeting reaction that quickly faded. "That's not what I meant," he said.

"I know," Ramona replied. "And that scares me."

"Scaring you is not hard to do."

"That doesn't make you not being here any less impactful."

Andrew held back from replying and stayed quiet.

"You can't just leave me all by myself," said Ramona.

"I can't help it if that's what I'm feeling," Andrew said with a shaky voice. His gaze finally settled and stayed fixated on the setting sun.

"But you don't always feel that way," Ramona replied. "What about all those times when you're happy and smiling and enjoying things?"

Andrew sighed, his eyes glistening with moisture. "It's all hollow, isn't it? The fact is that sometimes...even when I'm feeling good and happy...I don't feel...'happy'-happy. It's only a temporary feeling. It's transient. There's so many times even in the same day where I can swap between way too many emotions. It's like I don't even know what to feel because of how clouded it all seems. I just know that I have not ever felt truly happy. And that's fine, I guess. Some people in the world never do get to be happy. But sometimes, I wonder what that genuine kind of happiness would be like."

"Andrew...I..." Ramona let the start of her response trail off, unsure of what to say.

"It's alright if you don't understand. I don't expect anyone to. Ramona, I just...there's so many things wrong with me. I don't know who I am. Every day, I wake up and see myself as someone different from what I was the day before. There's no constant. I don't know what to make of all of this. I'm stuck wondering why I'm even here, what my purpose is, or if I even have a purpose. With everything that's happened, it's like I wasn't meant to exist."

"I'd much rather say that your parents have just been very bad at their job."

"Is it a job either of them even wanted to have? It never seems like it, more like I'm just a burden. I want to be hopeful and optimistic. But way too often, I'll feel enraged and alone too. It's a confusing mix that makes me lost and...weak. And then what do I end up doing half of the time? I put a blade to myself like an idiot. That's not...who I am. That shouldn't be who I am. But for the time being, I guess it is. What am I even? Besides a...mistake? At this point, all I feel like I can do now to put an end to this all is just leave everything behind and not come back."

Ramona gave her friend a deeply worried look. "And if you did, where would you go?"

"I don't know," he half-whispered. "Would it really matter?"

"Of course, that was something he ultimately never did," Ramona explained to Daisy. "They were just feelings of his, probably similar to but much less radical than the ones with him just outright dying or even dropping from reality altogether and ceasing to exist. Well, I'd like to believe they were just feelings, anyways."

"So you think that he might have actually just left in the middle of the night?" Daisy asked.

"I don't think he did," said Ramona. "I highly doubt he did, especially because of Neva now; but...it's a possibility."

"Maybe he didn't mean anything by it," said Daisy. "Not literally,

anyways. He always seemed to come up with some of the most surreal things to say whenever I was alone with him. Sometimes, he sounded absolutely nuts. But other times, well... I remember one time in the future while we were in Rainbow City, he asked me if I ever wondered what the world must be like through another person's eyes and body. And then, he took that a step further and asked if I had ever looked at a person and tried to imagine how life could have gone for them. And then, he took that a step further and asked if I could ever visualize them going through life events like school and applying for a job. And then he asked if I could try to comprehend wondering all of that about any one of the millions of people in the world. I'm there, just like...whoa."

"Did he ever tell you random things that he saw faces out of?" Ramona asked. "Like, he can see faces and expressions from inanimate objects or pictures of things. He insisted one time that a castle had been built to look like some depressed old guy. And then he also saw a falcon head in a picture of fire."

Daisy chuckled a little. "He's a funny dude."

"And he's got the best heart in the world," said Ramona.

"That sounds a little biased to me, but I can't say anything about that."

"I can."

"But you just said that it's possible that he could have basically disappeared on a whim. However unlikely, that sounds pretty cold and selfish if you ask me."

Ramona gave a faint smile and let her gaze drift to her feet. "I'd like to think he won't ever actually do anything to himself that'll take him away from me – er, from us, now. He's aware enough of how much it would affect those around him; and he was improving a lot since our return from the future. On top of that...he won't say it, and he sure won't act like it most of the time, but he would really miss us all. He gets emotionally attached so easily and so strongly; I don't think he'd ever willfully take himself away from everything he knows and loves. Deep down, he's more scared than I am."

The next day, Bowser piloted the Koopa Cruiser to the far northeast of the planet's northwestern quadrant. From the cockpit room's windows, the six Kruna had a wide, far-reaching view of the world below. Once they had passed over the boisterous and colorful metropolis known as Delight City, they noticed the surrounding landscape significantly darken the further north they went. Even the sky itself had a dingy mixture of tan, dark brown, and gray to its usual bright blue hue. The closer they got to Mount MAE – formerly Rock Rock Mountain – the more the environment seemed dead and overrun with architectural and mechanical prominence.

"I'm starting to get flashbacks of Nirvana Barrier Earth," murmured Neva.

"Looks like they might have changed the layout of this place," said Bowser.

"You mean this place didn't always look like this?" asked Marut.

"Not in the least," Bowser replied. "I'll direct us somewhere near that first mountain base, but where this ship'll remain inconspicuous."

Daisy huffed a long, slow breath. "That Commander Chrissy girl told us to come here and confront Commander Achlys, and she said that he or she was familiar, right?"

"That's what she said," replied Athelstan. "But Commander Achlys is one of The Learners. I know I remember us seeing his name when I was looking through MAE files back in Sunset Hill. That's about as familiar as he can be, if you ask me. None of us know anything else about him."

"Is it a 'he' or a 'she?' " asked Neva. "What kind of name is 'Maxilla Achlys?' "

"Depends on what part of the world he came from," said Bowser. "And I'm assuming it's a 'he' for the time being just to simplify things, but we'll see for ourselves soon enough."

Right when they approached the beginnings of a substantial change

in scenery, Bowser directed their airship to the side of Mount MAE's outer mountain border and parked it in a concealed trench between slopes. The six Kruna Yura then exited the ship and trotted away from the outer mountain base, heading into the grandiose land ahead that exhibited an aesthetic mixed between mysticism and hard metal. Beyond the mountain boundary, the open Mount MAE desert held taller peaks, spread-out towers, and reality-challenging, top-heavy structures. All of MAE's constructs had a build that blended concrete, advanced metals, pipes, gears, and huge, exaggerated clockwork components together into a dingy dark gray and brown appearance that mirrored that of the landscape and the skies above.

"I think we want to go ahead and check out that castle at the top of that first hill," Bowser said, pointing forward past towers and pipes. He had identified a shadowy, fortress-like building sitting on top of a steep but short climb and behind a web of pipelines and gears beside towers.

"That is one super dark castle," murmured Ramona.

"Ultra dark," said Marut. "I don't like the way it looks."

"There's nothing wrong with the dark itself," said Daisy. "It's what's lurking inside that you gotta be worried about."

"I know, but, uh, let's put it this way," said Ramona. "There's Andrew dark and then there's King Boo dark. That castle looks entirely King Boo dark."

"Yeah, that..." said Marut.

Daisy's gaze shifted all over the area they were advancing into. "They went ahead and leveled a lot of the mountains here. This place should not be this flat and open."

"This area seems more like an outpost to me than their headquarters," said Athelstan. "There isn't even a high MAE presence around here."

"But there's enough to cause problems," said Daisy.

"Regardless of what it seems like, this is a fairly decent choice for them," said Bowser. "It's remote and out of the public eye, which means that they've been able to build up their strength and plot their objectives out in secrecy. And there probably isn't any reason for there to be a high MAE presence because of how far out this place is. I think they're devoting more of their resources towards expansion instead."

"And that's good for us," said Daisy. "That makes our task here all the more easier."

"You keep saying 'easy,' and yet everything so far has been anything but that," grumbled Neva.

"But we're almost done, aren't we?" said Daisy. "This whole MAE-thing didn't take very long. So I still stand by this being kinda easy."

"Oh, so now it's *kinda easy,* " said Neva. "So if MAE kills us all, are we all gonna be *kinda* dead?"

"No – then we'd just be dead," Daisy said.

Neva scowled at Daisy's easygoing response. "That's not the point. Before, you guys were acting like we were going to go pick flowers with how easy you said this would be."

"I wouldn't mind stopping to actually pick some flowers," said Daisy.

"There's *no* flowers around here," said Bowser. "Just barren ground and industrial infrastructure."

"And those guys," Marut said, pointing up at the advancing MAE officials and robots.

Daisy rolled her eyes as the team prepared for battle. "Oh – well, that goes without saying."

The six Kruna Yura faced surprisingly light defense on their way towards Mount MAE's prominent dark castle. In fact, very little awaited them once they entered the castle. They beat every official

and robot they encountered, which was not very many compared to the amounts in every prior MAE territory they had visited. The lack of heavy enemy presence should have made the Kruna feel good about their current situation; but instead, it made them more cautious and on edge.

"Again; this place seems more like an outpost to me than their headquarters," Athelstan said as Daisy led them past a large ballroom.

"Really, this looks like a place for music," said Neva.

The castle's entire interior seemed as if it formerly held a purpose as a musical venue. Every hall was spacious and regal in its appearance. Strangely, and in an already dark environment with the muddied, dingy skies distorting the sunlight, very few lights were on throughout the castle. As they continued on through the castle, they noticed more evidence of the building having some sort of musical significance.

"Here's what I'm thinking," said Marut. "This place used to be some kind of concert hall, but then it got abandoned. And now MAE is doing their techy thing here. But they haven't been here for long – like, they just only recently got here, and they're still upgrading everything."

"Not a terrible idea by any means," said Bowser. "But I wonder if this is really some place that they're still trying to renovate, because there aren't many people or robots here at all to do that."

A musical chord reverberated through the building, followed by a loose pounding of drums and a full-fledged song. The Kruna exchanged puzzled looks. They became even more confused when they felt a strong energy signature; something they usually did not sense in areas containing only MAE officials and robots.

Daisy turned around and looked at her teammates. "What did you guys do?"

"We didn't do anything!" Athelstan replied, shrugging. "What are you accusing us of?"

"Are you sure nobody stepped on anything?" Daisy asked.

"Okay, we're not *completely* blind in here, you know," said Neva. "We can see enough to know what's going on. Just because we don't have cave-dweller eyes doesn't mean we can't see at all."

"Then why'd music turn on?" Daisy asked.

"Somebody tryna turn up?" Marut said.

"What is this techno-jazz-rock-orchestra playing?" muttered Neva.

"I don't know, but it's pretty beast," Marut said, a dance easing out of him. "Yo, MAE's got some good soundtrack though."

"I don't like this," Ramona mumbled, inching closer behind Daisy. "I feel like something's about to jump out at us."

"So hiding behind me is a good idea?" Daisy said, raising an eyebrow. "Get out from there. Like we should be worried if we get ambushed. What do they have to throw at us? We're too awesome for them to handle. They have yet to show us anything we can't handle. They're just a bunch of nuts and bolts and some wires and batteries. They'll never have anything on pure elemental wielding."

"Unless of course, well..." a charming voice echoed from the other end of the grand hallway. His statement trailed off into mischievous laughter. All of the Kruna looked in every direction, but none of them could identify anyone new in the shadowed halls.

"Hey!" Daisy yelled. "I know this is a dark castle, but *I* should at least be able to see where you're at! Where ya hiding? In the ceiling? Under the floor? In the bathroom?"

The voice laughed, this time more lighthearted in his tone. "I'm right where I need to be. The better question is why you're wandering around out here in Mount MAE."

"We're here to take you MAE losers down at the root!" Daisy replied. "Where's Commander Achlys? Don't tell us, and we'll just blast our way through whatever other towers there are around here."

"You're a feisty one," the voice spoke. "I'm happy to inform you that you're talking to him. I've been waiting for you, Kruna Yura."

"Alright then!" Daisy shouted, smirking. "Just skip the pre-game tricks and let's get this over with already! We don't have all day!"

"This is not a suitable place for battle, sweetheart," Commander Achlys said. "Why don't you step into the main concert hall? We can settle this where? Just follow the music to get there."

Bowser scowled. "This sounds like a trap."

"I feel like we must have said that about ten times so far," Daisy remarked.

"There's no need for traps here," said Commander Achlys. "But you'll see that for yourself."

Neva raised an eyebrow. "What's up with this guy's tone? It sounds sketchy."

"Maybe we should try getting him to come to us," said Athelstan.

"How?" asked Bowser.

"Look, we came here to defeat Commander Achlys," said Daisy, resuming her walk. "If he's really here and that's really him, then let's just go to that concert hall and face him there. I'll take his word that he's not planning any tricks. You guys wanna be paranoid, that's on you."

"It's not being paranoid; it's being sensible," said Bowser. "But fine, let's go to the concert hall and see what happens."

The Kruna trotted through the dark castle's many wide halls to get to where Commander Achlys had asked them to appear. The music sounded louder the closer they got to the main concert hall. When they finally reached the music's source, they saw a set of open doors leading into a grand auditorium that had loud, booming speakers sitting on top of a stage. No one sat in any of the lower or upper level seats. Not long after the Kruna entered the concert hall, the music faded out and shut off altogether.

"Well, we're here," said Athelstan. "I see no one else here though."

"At least it's a little brighter in here," said Ramona.

"But not by much," said Marut.

Intense in expression, Daisy shifted her sight all throughout the concert hall. "I can't spot him anywhere."

Neva seemed more enamored with the stage than with finding Commander Achlys. She walked over to the ramp leading onto the elevated performance platform and went up it to gaze out from center stage at the hundreds of seats filling the room. Saddening some, she clutched at her chest and sighed.

"There's no way I could ever..." Neva mumbled.

"Yo, Achlys!" Daisy shouted. "Where are ya?! We're all here just as you requested!"

"Watch this castle blow up and waste us all," Bowser said under his breath.

"What if that's why there was barely anyone else in here?" asked Ramona.

"Maybe Athelstan was on to something," said Marut. "Like, we should've tried to get Achlys out of the castle and somewhere outside."

"I'm only the smartest one here," said Athelstan. "We already forgot what happened with that factory in Sunset Hill, *and* that fenced area in the desert near Beanbean Kingdom; but that's okay."

Another set of doors that served as an alternate point of entry opposite the ones the Kruna had passed through then opened. The figure that entered strutted down the concert hall slopes on the purple soles of his black shoes and approached the stage with a casual cadence to his gait. His appearance drew awestruck looks from the Kruna.

"See? No trap," the new person said. His voice was identical to the

one that had talked to the Kruna in the halls.

"What?" Bowser huffed.

"No way..." murmured Daisy.

Chapter XVIII

Head Commander of MAE: Maxilla Achlys:

The purple and black yoshi that had entered the concert hall wearing a white top hat and a black shirt and blazer with a white cape stopped his walk at the foot of the stage and leapt onto it. Neva stepped back and away towards the stage's rear. All of the MAE emblems on the yoshi's attire were embossed with a gold color. Unlike most other yoshis, this one stood more upright and had a more angular gaze. But even more unlike other yoshis, he had a cybernetic tail and a set of robotic legs. His shoulders and part of his upper left arm also possessed mechanical traits. All of the robotic parts of the yoshi glowed neon black and neon purple in their translucent casing.

With the arrival of the MAE-aligned newcomer radiating a strikingly high energy signature, the other Kruna closed in on the stage and spread out among the seats. The spotlights in the room faded on, their glow dim and ambient. Admittedly feeling intimidated, Neva eased further to the edge of her side of the stage. The purple and black yoshi pulled out a Yoshi Berry and took his time eating it as he peered at each of the six Kruna before him.

"Maxilla Achlys...?" Ramona mumbled.

"That's right," the yoshi replied. "I am the Head Commander of MAE's operations. 'Supreme Commander' also works."

"Hold on," Bowser murmured. "Are you a-"

Commander Achlys unlimbered from across his back what appeared to be an electric viola with a matching bow. With one powerful strum across the bottom of the viola's strings, a C note sounded off. In addition to the sound, a blossom of shadows burst free from the viola and up towards the ceiling. Just for good measure, Commander Achlys hit an E note; and another dark uprising sprang from his viola as a result.

"So now that that's out of the way early, there shouldn't be any surprises," said Commander Achlys.

"I don't understand," said Daisy. "The head of an organization that wants to eliminate elemental wielding is a wielder himself?"

"I can't stand any of you," said Commander Achlys. "All of you. The world would be an exponentially better place without people like you running around and wreaking havoc."

"But *you're* one of us!" snapped Daisy.

"Yes, but I still possess a great hatred for your kind," said Commander Achlys. "Why couldn't I stay home on my island in my house and not have it burnt to ashes thanks to a couple of wicked fire wielders? A large house built from scratch that I earned a college education and music career to support, and vandals wanted to raid it and disintegrate it? Don't make me have to go into detail about the ice wielder that ruined my legs and temporarily crippled me until I gained my mechanical replacements. I just wanted a normal, peaceful life; but because I was a shadow wielder, I was on the receiving end of a hate crime. Multiple hate crimes. And it's not just me that has had to suffer. Elemental wielders don't know what to do with their powers aside from whatever suits them best. So I am doing this world a favor and putting the practice to rest. Got it? We have the chance to replace a destructive practice with the revolution and evolution that technology can provide. Continue to stand in my way if you wish, or repent and help MAE."

"Not a chance," said Daisy. "We'd rather be in a world of elemental wielding over a world of cold metal!"

"It's a shame," said Commander Achlys, shaking his head. "It looks like the performance I will put on for you will be your swan song."

Blackness flickered around the Dark Volt Viola the yoshi MAE commander held, his bow also resonating with shadowy wisps. When he glanced at Neva, she hopped off of the stage and onto the audience floor like the other Kruna. As one of his feet tapped on the wood-metal stage at a moderate-paced rhythm, Commander Achlys began working his viola. With the production of a melody primarily

based in B-flat minor came a harmonic aura of shadows that surrounded the purple and black yoshi.

"Time to dance," said Commander Achlys.

After plucking B-flat major notes in rapid succession, multiple shots of shadow spun around Commander Achlys and flew out from his dark aura at the Kruna. With the varied momentum and angle with which the shots flew, they whipped all throughout the room. All six of the Kruna endured at least one hit – Daisy and Athelstan both taking three, and Bowser taking four – but the blasts did not cause as much harm as they expected. Rather, they all felt an early sense of fatigue come on.

"Okay, what's the deal?" said Daisy. "I was actually feeling kinda hyper a minute ago!"

"Me too!" said Marut. "Now, not so much."

"I am well-versed enough in shadow wielding to utilize its energy drain abilities," said Commander Achlys. "So you better be careful, because you never know which burst or other shadow attack I use has fatiguing properties. But wait – there's more. Just to make sure that your lost energy doesn't go to waste, my internal cybernetics will absorb whatever free-flowing, stray excess there is in the vicinity."

"Oh, what?" Neva whined.

"Thanks for repaying the energy debt that attack put me in," said Commander Achlys. "If you can keep paying for my expenses, then this'll be over soon."

"It'll be over soon, alright," said Daisy.

Commander Achlys grinned and prepared to play his viola again. "Let's get funky."

A G-flat major chord sounded off when the MAE commander bowed his Dark Volt Viola, at which point a dark umbrella opened up from the elemental instrument to drift down on everyone around him. The Kruna all backed out of the attack's range in response, only for a

staccato of D-flat major notes to force the falling dark wall out in a sectioned rush that hit them all anyways.

"Groovy, babe," crooned Commander Achlys.

A legato of the A-flat major scale brought forth more shadows around Commander Achlys while the Kruna all forced themselves up after the previous energy-draining attack. The MAE commander then shifted the way he played his viola, making the shadows around him dance in a waltz. Right when Athelstan tore free a piece of the castle flooring underneath him, Commander Achlys swept his gathered dark power out in a wave. Athelstan had to abandon his hefty chunk of stone and jump along with the other Kruna to avoid the low shadow swath coming at them. Evading that move prevented Commander Achlys from sapping more of their power and replenishing his own, but the MAE commander resumed bowing his viola with minimal transition time wasted.

"Alright; we need you to stop doing what you're doing," Athelstan casually said.

"You can't stop the music," said Commander Achlys. A vibrant B-flat major pizzicato sent his shadows at the scattered Kruna in rapid-fire fashion. In the process of trying to dodge, both Marut and Ramona ended up catching bursts not fired at them. The same occurred for Neva and Bowser when crossing paths with Daisy and Athelstan. Commander Achlys's body readily absorbed all the energy that his darkness extracted, leaving the affected Kruna with far less power available than they should have had considering the short amount of time that had passed since the fight's beginning.

"I'm feeling kinda slow right now, guys," said Marut.

"Why am I feeling nauseous..." Ramona murmured.

"Well, screw me," Neva mumbled.

"You crazy cats gotta work on your style some more," said Commander Achlys.

"How about working on this?!" Daisy shouted, charging at the

commander. As she ran and leapt onto the stage, she set up one of her hands on the rod of her Laser Drill Staff. Her Iaido attack came out upon nearing him, only for him to get the underside of his viola up and block. Every subsequent rapid swing of her staff met his viola defense until she backed off on the fourteenth swipe. Just as Daisy put her staff back in its place on her back, the commander spun and whipped his tail at her. Back out into the audience area, Daisy flew; however, a Bob-omb soared over her and landed on stage by Commander Achlys. A swift but strong staccato of a B note in a medium octave and a flare of shadow power around him gave him a timely buffer against a good portion of the blast, but he still suffered some harm and got knocked back.

"Where'd that come from?" asked Bowser.

"Oh, that was me," said Marut. Everyone stared at him in surprise, to which he responded, "What? I had it in my belt."

"Y'all need to chill out with your razzmatazz," said Commander Achlys. "No more of that; we're here for *smooth jazz* ."

At the press of a button on a remote he pulled out, a drum beat started sounding off through the concert hall's speakers. The drums doubled in complexity within seconds, and Commander Achlys got to work putting out a chord progression through G-flat major, D-flat major, A-flat major, and B-sharp minor on his electric dark instrument. Orbs of dark power rose from Commander Achlys and shot out at the Kruna, forcing them all onto the defensive once again.

"I don't know if I can keep running around like this," said Ramona.

"If you can't keep up with the beat, you need to take a seat," said Commander Achlys.

"We gotta destroy that violin," Daisy said in between dodging.

"It's a viola," said Neva.

"Whatever – you know what I mean!" said Daisy.

"No – it's not whatever!" snapped Neva. "A violin and a viola are not

the same thing! They don't look the same, and they don't sound the same! Even in the same note of the same octave, they're not the same!"

All of a sudden, Commander Achlys switched up his chords. A sequence of A-flat major, C minor, E-flat major, and F minor brought all the bursts of shadow that had been missing the Kruna back in reverse direction. Unprepared, all of the Kruna felt blasts slam them in their backs. And once again, Commander Achlys revitalized himself while the Kruna grew more weary.

"You gotta slide with it," said Commander Achlys.

"I tell ya what – this guy is a professional, when it comes to that viola," said Athelstan, leaning on his knees.

Neva wiped at her forehead and sighed. "Eh, he's alright."

"I majored in music so I could master the major and minor scales," said Commander Achlys. "You wanna know what I minored in?"

"What?" Marut asked, confused. The next instant, a shadow burst flew straight at his head. Marut ducked in time, but only barely. An aggressive replay of Commander Achlys's first chord progression brought forth shotgun-like blasts of dark power from the Dark Volt Viola and the room's wireless speakers. Though everyone else went on the evasion again, Ramona raised her light power and put up an active counter-defense with her own blasts. Charging her Solar Greatsword gave her the ability to slash through the darkness heading her way without much difficulty.

As all the other Kruna suffered more damage and energy drain, Ramona held her own and kept her defenses high and alert for Commander Achlys's repeat of his second chord progression. She soon had an opening develop through which she released a laser out of her sword. Commander Achlys felt the attack's hot light energy bite into his bulbous nose, which threw off his viola playing and forced him to cease his work on the instrument. Now, the other Kruna could stop their movement and catch their breath.

"Whoa, Ramona!" said Neva. "You actually stood up to that dark

stuff?"

"I was just tryna not lose any more power!" said Marut.

"I think we all were!" added Bowser.

"I feel fairly comfortable against a shadow wielder," said Ramona, charging her sword up some more. "I've practiced with Andrew enough for that, and I felt like I had enough energy to spare anyways. This guy's not too different from Andrew, really. He's just using an instrument and music for his attacks, though his energy drain is definitely better than Andrew's – probably better than King Boo's too. Other than that, he's just another shadow wielder."

"Hey, yeah!" exclaimed Daisy. "There's nothing special about his shadow! What are we doing?"

"You think you know, but I don't think so," said Commander Achlys. A disgruntled diminished seventh chord on D lashed out from his viola an array of sharp shadow javelins, only for each of the Kruna to counter and block using their respective elemental powers. As the remnants of the Shadow Javelin attack faded, a light beam shot through the room and struck Commander Achlys off the side of the stage. In the process of falling, he lost his hold on his Dark Volt Viola.

"Look at that!" Daisy said with a sly grin. "This whole thing just got that much easier-"

"No – shut up!" snapped Neva.

"This concert don't need a light show," said Commander Achlys. He inhaled and breathed out a shadow burst off of his long yoshi tongue at Ramona, but she sidestepped out of its way. The second blast that Commander Achlys spat out at her, she cut through with her light-charged sword. Ramona then slashed a cutting blade of light at the commander, which he countered and canceled out through use of a third successive Shadow Breath.

Commander Achlys still ended up getting struck, however; not from any attack Ramona made. Ironically enough, a *shadow* blast

pounded him. While the MAE commander sustained the attack's damage, a majority of the Kruna looked around the room in bewilderment.

"Who fired that shadow bolt?" asked Marut.

"Andrew?!" Ramona squealed.

"That was me!" Neva replied, her Alkemei Hien's glow fading. The tip of her Freeze Coil Sniper smoked with a blackish-purple mist rather than its usual cloudy white haze. "Oh, thanks for the attacks to copy, Nose-a-saurus Rex!"

"Not cool, ice cube," said Commander Achlys.

"You mad, dude?" Neva said, taking aim with her sniper. "Huh, bruh?"

Commander Achlys ran in avoidance of the copied shadow blasts Neva let fly from her rifle. He jumped back onto the stage and made a break for his viola; but right as he got to it, the heap of stone that Athelstan had pulled up earlier fell on top of the instrument and crushed it. Scowling, Commander Achlys ducked behind Athelstan's mass for protection against the last few shadow blasts Neva fired.

"This is how you do rock music," said Athelstan.

"So y'all wanna rock out, do ya?" said Commander Achlys.

"You both can always rock your way right to Hell," said Neva.

Commander Achlys dove out of the way when Athelstan commanded his mass to shift backwards. The MAE commander then unlimbered an electric guitar out of his lateral roll. With the extra assistance of a Flutter Kick, Commander Achlys jumped onto the left speaker of the pair.

"Watch out!" Commander Achlys said with a grin. "I'm sharp with my A's."

A grinding A-sharp major riff off of his Black Power Guitar pumped out shadows from the speakers in undulating waves. Despite the

upped intensity of the attack compared to Commander Achlys's offensive with his viola, each of the Kruna matched the incoming shadows with their own elements for a successful defense.

"Knock him off his perch!" Daisy shouted.

" *You're too blind* to see it," the commander sang. " *Too blind* to *see it.* "

An up-tempo chord progression loop through B minor, F-sharp minor, E major, and A major brought forth around the stage an occlusive cloud of darkness. Before long, the whole stage was covered in black. No one could see anything on the stage; not even Daisy's earth wielder eyes could see into the cloud.

"Are you scared of something; I hear your heart thumpin'," Commander Achlys sang.

As the commander continued looping through his progression, shadow blasts came out from the cloud at random intervals and flew in random directions. Though no more difficult to deal with than the previous attack, none of the Kruna could do a thing to try and retaliate, for none of them could see him. Commander Achlys had more or less chosen a defensive way of going on the offensive in trying to catch the Kruna off guard with concealed attacks. Unfortunately for him, the Kruna did not seem confused with his musical elemental wielding anymore; and they had an increasingly easier time protecting themselves against his current tricky tactic. Marut had outright turned the whole ordeal into a game of trying to pull off dodging tricks.

"Ooh, we weavin'!" shouted Marut.

"Quit playing around!" Bowser barked. "This is serious!"

"Man, I'm weavin' these!" Marut said. "He can keep this up as long as he wants! I'ma weave all of them!"

"He's not gonna keep this up for long!" Ramona said as she slashed at a shadow blast coming at her. She amplified the power running through her sword and released it into the dark cloud around the

stage. Ramona's light cleared away some of the occlusive shadow, revealing the base of one of the speakers. Seeing this, Neva rolled to her right and got a shot of her sniper rifle off above where the base of the exposed speaker was. Though the ice attack failed to hit Commander Achlys, it damaged some of the speaker and lessened the amount of shadow blasts flying out.

"Hey, that's the right idea!" Daisy said. "Keep doing that!"

When the darkness closed back up, Ramona let off another strong light blast around the same area and gave Neva another opportunity to wreak havoc on the speaker. Bowser and Marut joined in too, and a sizable explosion wrecked the speaker and left just one origin for the flurry of shadows still coming out. The next chance she got, Ramona scythed a wave of light at the base of where the other blasts were coming from; and Bowser, Neva, and Marut assaulted the second and final speaker. Ramona then got ahead of the situation and zapped a light beam at the top of the dark cloud above where the second speaker was, and the shadow bursts stopped altogether. Two seconds later, the remaining speaker also exploded into a busted mess.

"Ramona, I think you got him," said Bowser.

"Jammin' on 'em!" shouted Commander Achlys, shifting into view behind Ramona.

"Oh crap-" Ramona shrieked.

Commander Achlys had a prime opportunity to jam his guitar into Ramona's back for a critical hit out of the shadow shift he had used to sneak away from the stage. There was no way Ramona could have avoided the attack with the closeness of Commander Achlys and the insufficient reaction time anyone there had. And yet, Daisy found a way to not only run over and catch his guitar before it could hit Ramona, but also fling him into a spin behind them. Before Commander Achlys regained control of himself, Athelstan got in a quick hammer strike on him that launched him into the seats on the other side of the concert hall.

With the darkness around the stage clearing, Marut and Neva both

leapt onto it and got their tools aimed at the recovering MAE commander. Bowser, Ramona, Athelstan, and Daisy effectively had Commander Achlys confined to that one side of the concert hall. At this point, there was very little Commander Achlys could do to get him out of his cornered state. Ramona advanced closer toward him than did the other Kruna, her sword glistening with bright golden power.

"You're, you're pretty much beaten," said Ramona. "So, uh, like, could you give up?"

Neva facepalmed herself. "Excellent delivery, light bulb."

" *I'm* beaten?" Commander Achlys said with a laugh. "Let's reevaluate something here-"

"Wait a minute – is he moving?" asked Neva.

None of the Kruna could tell for sure, but Commander Achlys's body appeared to be moving yet staying still at the same time, almost as if phasing through and against himself. In actuality, he had created a quick but effective illusion trick that made the Kruna's visual perception of him distort to the point where they did not notice him playing his guitar until they heard its gritty notes sound off. A rippling shockwave of shadow power erupted from Commander Achlys as his illusion faded, rushing at Ramona and the Kruna around her through the E major, D-flat major, B minor, and D major chords he looped his play by.

"Whoa – what?!" Ramona cried. She got her charged sword up in time to catch the spreading shadow attack; but it seemed as if just the immediate resistance alone set off a volatile reaction. The forces of Commander Achlys's shadows reversed and pulled back, a mock suction field resulting that tugged on all of the Kruna. With the increasing complexity and vigor Commander Achlys put behind his guitar play came a massive surge of power around his instrument where the vortex originated. Such a vortex radiated so much power and had such a scope around Commander Achlys that it acted as a simultaneous defense against the air and ice Marut and Neva sent at him while pulling in the other four Kruna.

"Just another shadow wielder?" said Commander Achlys. "How many have you come across that can harness the power of music too?"

Commander Achlys's fierce effort on his guitar made his Shadow Vortex a formidable technique that soon pulled on Marut and Neva too. The Kruna had to put their full focus towards making sure they did not get sucked in, for there was no telling what kind of harm coming into contact with the vortex origin would incur on any of them. However, they soon got an idea once they saw some of the concert hall seats getting ripped free and vacuumed in. Each chair met a timely, grisly demise upon smashing into the vortex origin, which did not bode well for the Kruna.

"Where the hell did they pick up this guy?" hollered Athelstan.

"Oh snap – nobody's weavin' this!" Marut exclaimed.

Out of all the Kruna there, Ramona seemed to be struggling the least. Her sword held upside down in front of her, Ramona forced out as much of her power as she could manage while resisting the pulling forces Commander Achlys's Shadow Vortex spread on them all. She knew that – unless Daisy somehow executed yet another miraculous feat – she had the best chance of being effective against the MAE commander's offensive, for her light element served as a direct foil to shadow. But in addition to that, Ramona also knew that the antagonistic pairing operated both ways. Her light would either be very strong or very weak against Commander Achlys's shadow depending on whether or not she could overpower it. That meant that she had to make sure she outdid the commander's power output, or else face a stiff penalty.

"It's about time I started...contributing more," Ramona grunted out. "So...so HERE'S MORE!"

The other Kruna witnessed a fantastical uprising of light from where Ramona stood, centered around her sword and torso and challenging Commander Achlys's Shadow Vortex head on. Concern soon showed on the MAE commander's face as his guitar playing broke down and scrambled. The Kruna of Light's power surge swiftly blunted the Shadow Vortex's suction and began to overrun it.

"Whoa, slow down, killer bee!" said Commander Achlys. "That's not cool!"

Commander Achlys tried putting out ultra-hard riffs to strengthen his vortex, but all he did was prolong the inevitable. Ramona's escalating power pushed evermore closer to him, her display amazing him as much as the other Kruna. Unable to play any harder than he already had, Commander Achlys realized that he could not stop the wall of light heading his way. However, he realized that too late. The mass of light blasted Commander Achlys into the wall behind him and burnt him almost as much as it demolished his guitar. Soon, Ramona felt little resistance against her attack.

Once Ramona cut the flow of her power off, the Kruna could see the trail that her attack had left along the concert hall floor. The charred trail led up to the crumbling impression in the wall where Commander Achlys stuck to. Commander Achlys flopped onto the ground moments later, beaten and defeated. He likely knew that he had lost, for he stopped trying to get up almost as soon as he had made the attempt to.

"Smooth, Big Dawg," grunted Commander Achlys. "Smooth..."

"Hey, Ramona," said Marut. "Maybe ya should've started with that."

"Nice going, Ramona!" Daisy said. "You really stepped up on this one!"

"Uh, oh, yeah, I did, didn't I?" said Ramona. "I mean, I didn't mean to. I just...just tried? A lot? Well, not really – I wasn't, um... I tried more. Okay..."

Daisy laughed. "Well, it worked out! Great job!"

"Yes, excellent work," said Bowser.

Neva folded her arms and looked away, but she smiled. "Yeah, you were pretty good and stuff."

Ramona blushed, almost to an excessive extent. "Oh, thanks. Glad to know I'm effective. I've actually been feeling noticeably better about myself and everything now that I've been back out with you

guys. This helps a lot."

The group then heard a low laugh coming from Commander Achlys, who staggered to his feet and reached into one of his pockets. Neva immediately got her rifle up and pointed its laser sight at his plump nose, though he showed no hostility or unease. Considering how previous encounters with MAE's Learners have gone however, the Kruna collectively backed away and gave themselves clear routes to make a break for the exits should Commander Achlys try a fatal last ditch effort.

"What's that you got in your hand, man?" Neva asked.

"You mean this?" Commander Achlys said, pulling out his remote from earlier. The movement alone made Neva move her rifle's sight to the center of his forehead, but she held off on firing. "Let's just say...if you think that this is over, and that everything's going to be fine and right in the world for you people, and that you elemental wielders have won anything – *anything* – at all, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"Huh?" Daisy mumbled.

Commander Achlys pushed a button on his remote, and an azure hologram materialized from a special compartment on the remote's center. The hologram showed a smaller version of a certain, familiar head and upper body that the Kruna recognized the moment she spoke with Commander Achlys.

"I've done my best, Commander Sindograss," said Commander Achlys. "It just wasn't enough. But, do you have the footage saved?"

Commander Sindograss nodded. "All captured in high definition. You've done what was required of you, Maxilla."

"Chrissy?" Daisy said. "What's going on here?"

"It's simple," replied Commander Achlys. "Plan A was for me to destroy you. But since that didn't happen, Plan B will take effect instead."

"I don't get it," muttered Marut.

"Allow me to explain," Commander Achlys said. "This whole clash has been streaming from the moment you all stepped foot in here. Compounded with all you have done before, you are now guaranteed public enemy number one status to MAE and all of MAE's hard-working, peace-loving citizens. You'll never be able to step foot in another MAE nation ever again! Not if you want to live! And once MAE has reached agreements for a global presence and influence, you won't be able to step foot anywhere on this planet – if you're still alive by then. You and your kind are finished!"

"I'm gonna frickin' kill you!" Neva screamed.

"You wouldn't want to do that, now would you?" asked Chrissy. "There's hidden cameras all over that room that are still sending data back to MAE Command Center to this very second, and they will continue to do so until you leave. It's bad enough you're opposing MAE as much as you have been, but killing *another* MAE commander? And on camera? Never mind in MAE territories – that's just not a good look for you around the world in general. There's enough non-MAE authorities questioning you already."

"Hey – we didn't kill any of them!" Daisy snapped.

"Sure you didn't," said Chrissy, raising an eyebrow and smirking.

"What are your next orders, Commander?" Commander Achlys asked Chrissy.

"Return to the Command Center," said Chrissy. "You'll have to take my place here while I make a trip to MAE Pi'illo Island. We'll discuss the details once you're away from those Kruna Yura."

"Understood, Commander," replied Commander Achlys. His hologram communication shut off, and he put his remote away. "I'm sure we'll see each other again, Kruna. That is, if you're not already taken out of the picture by then."

Commander Achlys marched out of the concert hall, blank in the face but deliberate in his stride. Begrudgingly, all of the Kruna let the MAE commander walk out. They themselves would then leave the dark castle with the reality that their trip to Mount MAE may have

done more harm than good.

Chapter XIX

The True Head Commander:

The Kruna Yura returned to Mushroom Kingdom that same night just hours after the events at Mount MAE. A welcome discovery, the MAE robots already there in Mushroom Kingdom did not show hostility towards them. Despite that, Bowser and Neva noticed some of the robots eyeing them up and down. When the Kruna confronted a couple of the robots, they refused to engage in conversation. The robots said little to the Kruna and moved away from them, yet they watched and examined them.

The Kruna hurried into Peach's Castle with the utmost haste after receiving multiple calls through their KY Communicators during the latter portion of their flight back. Peach, Toad, Alden, Toadette, Wario, Waluigi, and Donkey Kong had all contacted them; and all of them more or less had the same reasoning behind their calls. Upon entering the castle's main living room, the Kruna saw Toadette lounging on the couch.

"Gimme a status report," Daisy said as the Kruna scattered across the room.

"You guys are all over the news, for one," Toadette said. She had the HD widescreen TV on a MAE-owned channel.

Peach scuffled into the room after rushing down the main stairs. "What have you guys been doing?"

Bowser scowled and folded his arms. "It's not what we've been doing – it's what MAE is trying to make us look like!"

"Oh, so you guys aren't just killing everyone and wrecking all their stuff then," Toadette said with relief.

"We've just been doing the wrecking," said Neva.

"Here's what happened, before any of that propaganda MAE's

spitting out twists your perception," said Daisy. "Commander Buinton outright killed herself, Commander Malakai died trying to take us out with him, and Wario technically killed Commander Yulin; but they're gonna try their damnedest to pin it all on us to make us and elemental wielders in general look bad. And where's Wario, anyway?"

"Out," said Toadette, shrugging. "I didn't ask him where he went. But it seems like MAE doesn't even care much about him anymore. They're much more focused on you guys."

"We now go live to Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss in Twilight City," the newswoman anchoring on TV said. "She'll give us the latest on the growing situation with MAE and the Kruna Yura."

"Wow! We had some pretty convenient timing!" Athelstan remarked.

"It just turned ten, like, a minute ago," said Toadette.

"That's her, right?" Peach asked, gesturing at the TV. "The girl walking up to the podium? Chrissy?"

"Yup," said Daisy.

"You know, real talk – she's actually pretty cute," said Marut.

Neva groaned. "Marut-"

"Hey, don't go looking at me all weird!" hollered Marut. "Like, just sayin'. It's an observation. It's a comment. She looks cute. That's all I said."

"Well, you're not wrong there," said Athelstan.

"Yeah..." Ramona said with a simper. "I mean...I can't stand her!"

"Neither can I," said Daisy. "She's a total headcase."

"I can already tell how this presser is going to go," said Neva.

"A good afternoon to all of MAE's beloved people and to the other good citizens of Earth," said Chrissy. "Or, a good night to you,

depending on where you are. We thank you for tuning in to this impromptu press conference *slash* public address. I apologize for the awkward and hastily announced timing of it, but I will be making an important business trip shortly following this. Because of the nature of my trip, I will not be available for comment for some time; so speaking here and now is better than waiting a few extra days. Now, I'm sure some of you already know about the events that took place today at Mount MAE and of all the prior assaults the Kruna Yura have orchestrated. In response, we're in the process of beefing up security throughout all MAE territories, states, and provinces. Expect a four-fold increase in defense power in your areas soon; we have to do all that we can to stop these fiendish elemental wielders."

"I hate her," mumbled Neva.

"We are also doubling down on our current policies regarding the prohibition of elemental wielding in MAE's nations," said Chrissy. As she talked, video of the Kruna battling against Commander Malakai and Commander Achlys, as well as them fighting through Diamond City, cut in and out on the TV screen. "Only select elemental wielders officially a part of MAE's organization or governmental system are exempt from the mandate. All other elemental wielders are to be banished. Failure to leave MAE will equate to immediate, unquestioned arrest. We have seen now on multiple occasions the destructiveness that elemental wielders are capable of, and we can not allow such a dangerous practice to exist in a nation whose principles lie in evolution and advancing society through the benefits that science, engineering, technology, and robotics can provide."

"That blasted woman," muttered Ramona. "I can't believe she's actually doing this! This is so cheap!"

"It seems like she'll manipulate anything she sees fit," said Bowser. "We'll need to be even more careful now than before."

"Be on the lookout for these specific elemental wielders," said Chrissy. "These Kruna Yura – Daisy Sarasa, Bowser Koopa, Marut Kaze, Athelstan Hayer, Ramona Maggie-Lynn, and Neva Alekseeva – are malevolent enemies of MAE and egregious offenders to the peace and prosperity we wish to promote. They are not welcome in any MAE territory. Should they trespass into our boundaries again,

they shall meet swift and brutal retaliation. I speak on behalf of all of MAE when I say that these criminals will meet justice soon enough."

"At this point, I think it's safe to say that she's the one calling the shots," said Daisy. "We've gotta end this MAE thing quick before it gets out of hand. This could really evolve into a war if we don't act fast enough."

"If you guys aren't careful, you won't be in trouble with just MAE," said Peach. "You could have other countries and kingdoms outside of MAE look at you the wrong way too."

"I know – that's why we had to let Commander Achlys walk," said Daisy. "If we tried to do anything extra with him – and after we had been told that we were being recorded, at that – that would've just given Chrissy more fuel to burn."

"Remember when you guys said that this whole thing would be easy?" asked Neva.

"Hey, it wouldn't be a great adventure if things didn't get hard," said Daisy. "Now we know we're in for something good."

Neva gritted her teeth and grumbled. "I know I've got to be beyond mental, but you're an asylum patient."

"Do you guys wanna hear anything more that she has to say?" asked Toadette, bored. "Because, she's just talking about tech and gadgets and stuff now, and Magical Knight Moon Dawn is kinda going on right now-"

"OH MY GOSH!" Ramona squealed, crashing on the couch next to Toadette. "Put it on! Put it on! Put it on!"

Bowser raised an eyebrow. "What's 'Magical Knight Moon Dawn' supposed to be?"

"Only one of the hottest anime ongoing right now!" Ramona cheered as Toadette changed the channel.

"Man, that's that super gushy romance girly crap," said Marut. "Seriously, Ramona? That?"

Ramona kept a straight, joyful face. "That was the one good thing about Andrew not being around; I didn't have to hear him sass and get on me over my anime. It's a shame that some people can't appreciate masterpieces."

"You think *that's* a masterpiece?!" said Marut. "That's just some cheesy drama about dating! You gotta check out Cosmic Wall! That's where it's at."

"That's hardly where it's at," said Ramona. "Maybe in the beginning, but all it is now is mindless violence and endless power-scaling that, honestly, has gone on for too long and has turned the show into a shameless money grab. At some point, you have to ask yourself how unrealistic a cast of godlike characters is; because how accurately can any studio depict god power? And then what happens if the plot goes beyond that, and they have to get even stronger? Then what?"

"Then anime nerds'll need to find something better to do," grumbled Neva.

Daisy frowned and shook her head. "Alright; we need to figure out how we're gonna go about taking down MAE in the best way we can."

"We'll have to identify wherever their Command Center is," said Bowser. "I have a feeling that that's their *real* headquarters."

"Or, if Chrissy's their leader, then we can just intercept her somewhere and take her down," Athelstan suggested. "That'd end things quick, wouldn't it? And she said she would be in Pi'illo Island. So we could confront her there."

"Yeah, but did she say how long she would be there?" asked Bowser.

"Probably long enough for us to find her if we leave early enough tomorrow," said Athelstan. "She did just mention that she would be unavailable for a few days, I think. Then, we could get Chrissy to tell us where MAE Command Center is, and voila! We can shut down MAE in no time at all! That'd be both their leader *and* their HQ gone

from the equation!"

Neva sighed in discomfort. "Do we really have to? I feel like absolute garbage after fighting that annoying dark musician. I'm really worn out."

"It's to our advantage that we go as soon as possible," said Bowser. "The sooner we get through this, the better. So rest up as much as you can while you have the chance. We'll need to be at as close to full power as we can be."

"Really, we all oughta be getting ready to sleep now," said Daisy.

"Are we crashing here again?" asked Athelstan.

"Sure, I don't see why not," said Peach. "You guys are always welcome. The castle's more than big enough."

"Great," said Bowser. "It's always appreciated."

Peach smiled and nodded. "Of course."

That night, Daisy stayed by Ramona's side all the way up until the light wielder had dozed off sprawled out on her bed in the castle. As soon as she heard Ramona's breathing shift to soft snoring, Daisy felt comfortable enough to leave her alone in her room to sleep. Daisy made little noise in exiting and closed the door with gentle touch and ease, turning the lights off and smiling on her way out from the sight of Ramona's relaxed, peaceful face.

It was midnight then, and everyone else had already drifted to sleep. That just left Daisy up and wandering the castle halls. A large part of her wanted to ditch the fight against MAE and go looking for Andrew. Less dire but no less important, Warra had been missing too. The team felt incomplete without them, and their powers could help tremendously against MAE. But because of the circumstances, the Kruna now had no choice but to put stopping MAE as the number one priority.

We really gotta find Warra and Andrew , Daisy thought as she

sauntered about the castle. *But MAE has to be stopped . They're set on wiping out elemental wielding altogether and everyone who practices it. But if they do that, then what's going to happen if some really dangerous threat attacks a MAE-dominated world? I doubt they've built anything that could match what a powerful enough elemental wielder could do. They want to act like we're all terrible beings – and sure, a fair amount of us are – but we've done plenty to keep this world safe and in order. They even have elemental wielders as part of their organization – they even have a wielder as one of their* commanders... *Are those wielders aligned with MAE the ones that they'll spare? Or will MAE end up killing* them *off too?*

Daisy saw the luminous moon overhead raining down lunar light on the humid summer night when she stepped out onto the roof deck of Peach's Castle. Sighing, she folded her arms and gazed out over Toad Town. Everything that encapsulated their current adventure felt so foreign. They had a fight on their hands against an enemy not based on power, but based on number and technology. Rosalina was presumably still busy with Mario and Luigi, so the Kruna would not get any assistance or guidance from her. The constant threat of Kokoro popping up also loomed over them all.

And the mere thought of Kokoro reminded Daisy of what she had initially gone out to get the Alkemei she currently had on for. The possibility of Osiris working to free himself from the imperfect Elemental Seal binding him to the Alkemei Ankh Kokoro still had presented another threat, one less immediate but far more sinister. Daisy only needed a quick refresher of what happened in the future with Osiris's freeing to confirm that much. Based on what Arka Knight had told her, her Alkemei Vranzer had a chance of neutralizing Osiris; yet, Daisy still could not figure out how. Even more, she still had not figured out how to so much as activate the Vranzer. In no way did it ever seem to do anything for her; not anything that she could tell, anyways.

Defeat MAE. Figure out how to activate the Vranzer. Take the Ankh from Kokoro. Imprison Osiris in a true Elemental Seal and ensure neither he nor the Shadow Queen could ever attain freedom again. Find Warra. Find Andrew. The proverbial to-do list stopped there. And to top it all off, just about each major objective had smaller

tasks making them up.

So much to do, Daisy thought. *Life hasn't been normal for a long time...and it's not gonna be normal for the foreseeable future... This is what it's like to be important, I guess! Always gotta be busy!*

A subtle grin forming, Daisy stayed out on the castle roof and let the scenery over the Mushroom City suburb calm her to the point of inducing drowsiness. Soon, she would retire for the night. As soon as she had her fill of the serene setting, she would.

It'll all work out in the end , she thought. *I'm certain we'll get it all solved. I've got the best crew to do it with! It's just gonna take some time and some effort, but we'll get through it. If we can accomplish what we did in the future, we can get through anything.*

Not long before she wanted to go inside, she felt something high on her upper left arm. When she looked at her arm, she saw a mosquito on it. The bug likely had landed on her to procure a feast of her blood. How long it had been there, Daisy did not know.

Oh yeah, I forgot, Daisy thought, getting ready to smack at the bug. *It* is *summer. I shouldn't stay out here for long.*

Daisy noticed something wrong the moment she smashed the insect. Though she crushed the mosquito, its body felt considerably more hard and tough than she had expected. Even more confusing, the bug did not appear as if it had been squished. Rather, it sat on her arm and stuck to the bottom of her opposite fist in distinct pieces. A noticeable but tiny portion of her blood leaked from the mosquito's remains.

When she touched one of the bug's pieces with her finger, it still felt hard and stiff. All of the smashed mosquito did. The pieces had no give to them when she tried pressing them between her fingers. Wiping off the bits stuck to the underside of her hand felt like scraping off crusty sand or metal grains.

That's not supposed to happen... Daisy said in thought.

Mildly disturbed, Daisy's eyes darted all around her in every

direction she could look. All of a sudden, she did not feel as comfortable standing outside anymore. Just seconds later, she went back into the castle with a quicker than moderate pace to her steps.

Chapter XX

White Metal Jungle:

The paired islands of MAE Pi'illo Island and Mekarsari existed in a vast expanse of Arlan Ocean waters near the globe's equator. After their fight had concluded against Commander Achlys yesterday, the Kruna Yura had heard Chrissy mention visiting MAE Pi'illo Island, the larger of the island pair. They hoped to run into her, capture her, and get her to reveal the whereabouts of the MAE Command Center.

Because of how built up MAE Pi'Illo Island was on its western half, particularly around Wakeport, Bowser piloted the Koopa Cruiser to a well-hidden area on the southern end of the border between Driftwood Shore and Mushrise Park. Once parked, the airship stayed concealed in the trench of a wide and deep ravine under a boardwalk. The Kruna then stepped onto level ground and looked ahead at the forested Mushrise Park in front of them.

"I'd have to imagine that Pi'illo Castle is the most likely place we'll run into her," said Athelstan. "From what I saw, the most viable route to get there is through the south of Mushrise Park and into Somnom Woods. That region seemed to be the least mechanized and MAE-dense of the island."

"I'm surprised they somehow managed to make the beach here all techy too," said Neva. The amount of electronic metal surfaces and structures branching out around Driftwood Shore and north into Wakeport was high by itself, but the fact that bridges and towers also stood on the beach made MAE's mechanization feel more overbearing than usual.

"Seems like everybody is over on the eastern side of the beach, towards Wakeport," said Bowser.

"And there's nobody here," said Marut. A grin then crept on his face. "Hey, if it's just us here, why don't we-"

"No," said Bowser. "Just, no. We are not doing one of those things where we stop everything and have a beach party just because there's a beach nearby! Not here, not now."

"I was gonna say that we should just try and lure Chrissy here," said Marut.

"Oh," said Bowser. "Well, that's not much better. How are we supposed to lure her here if we don't know where she could be?"

"I dunno," said Marut, shrugging. "Does she like pizza? The one in the cruiser's still hot."

"Let's, uh, just stick to what Athelstan said," stated Daisy. "Marut had the right idea in trying to make it so that we could face Chrissy with minimal guard involvement... But, no. Let's just get going."

"It's a short stretch of land between here and Somnom Woods," said Bowser. "And the woods by themselves should provide ample cover for us. We just need to not do anything stupid. Can we do that?"

"You mean not do anything stupid?" asked Marut. "Oh yeah. Sure."

The next instant, the group heard a loud clang. Everyone turned to look at Ramona, who had bent over to pick up her Solar Greatsword and its sheath. "Um, sorry about that," said Ramona. "My harness felt kinda...too snug around my chest; so I was trying to adjust it, and it sorta fell out of its interlocking, and...sorry."

Neva let out a loud burp after drinking from her water bottle, which then got Daisy, Bowser, and Athelstan to stare at her. "What's your problem?" she grumbled, belching again.

Daisy got an incoming call from her KY Communicator and flipped it open. "This is Daisy... Toad! This is *not* a good time for that! Don't you know we're out here at Pi'illo Island?!... What? I thought Marut told you we were going!"

"Oh, yeah – I forgot to do that," said Marut.

Clutching her stomach, Neva put out a third burp and stared at her water bottle with concern. "Did I chug that down too quick?"

Bowser pinched between his eyebrows and turned to start heading into Mushrise Park. "OHHhh-kay – this oughta be good..."

The six Kruna had a relatively simple time carving through the lighter defenses on the route they took through the recreational Mushrise Park region of Pi'illo Island. However, they noticed the presence of MAE guards and robots start to strengthen once they reached the border with Somnom Woods. MAE defenses continued to increase in number upon entering Somnom Woods, a dark and gloomy forest that now more closely resembled a shiny and metallic jungle with all the industrialization and roboticization the environment had underwent.

"We're gonna need to step up our pace and get through here fast," said Daisy. "At this point, they have to know that we're here with all these guards and robots coming at us now."

"Here's hoping Chrissy isn't out getting coffee at a Starbeans somewhere," said Athelstan.

"Here's hoping that coffee spills all over her and burns her skin," muttered Neva.

The Kruna Yura trotted into an open clearing of Somnom Woods where ruins and a temple had been overhauled into modernized, technological renovations. With the dense tree cover and heavy amounts of foliage, the Kruna could not see much of the buildings and structures. A few moments after entering the clearing, they caught sight of a whole slew of Patrol Bots and other attack robots rushing straight at them from a path next to one of the buildings.

"More?" Neva groaned with a contorted grin. "How am I not surprised? We only ran into three hundred other ones on this crummy island!"

"Hey, let's try to do that one trick we figured out earlier," Marut said to Neva.

Neva nodded, and Bowser and Ramona flared up their elemental

powers. Athelstan heaved and launched a boulder at a grouping of the thirty MAE robots, his massive rock crushing five of them. Daisy ran at a different grouping with her Laser Drill Staff tearing along at the grassy ground under her and seismic power building in the tool's head; but something bizarre happened that prevented her from unleashing what would have been a potent attack. She got tripped up on something and fell. No one saw how she could have fallen. By all accounts, it seemed as though she had slipped – and on *nothing,* at that.

"Daisy!" Bowser barked. "What happened?!"

Daisy could not recover in time before a stun shot zapped her and put her into a temporary paralysis. Some of the other Patrol Bots also shot their stun shots at her out of their shoulder-mounted guns to add onto and prolong the Kruna Yura of Earth's immobility. Thankfully, before any of the robots near her could get to her, Bowser and Ramona blasted them away.

The time for Marut and Neva's combination attack came, the both of them ready with their advanced wielder powers. Through the combined abilities of Neva's magnetism and Marut's lightning, the two of them shot out from their main elemental tools a magnetized stream of blue-white power that struck one MAE robot and then bounced to the next one in a chain-like effect. Their magnetic chain shocked each robot it jumped to and maintained its hold on every robot it came in contact with. Soon, Marut and Neva had all of the remaining robots caught in their energized stream of magnetic lightning and electricity; and a quick tug forced all of the robots together into a compressed but extended line with the energized stream running through them. One final jolt on both Marut's and Neva's parts repelled and scattered the MAE robots all over the clearing into broken pieces and fried circuits.

"And we are done here with that!" said Marut, retracting his power. "You guys like those strats?"

Bowser raised an eyebrow. "Strats?"

"Short for 'strategies,' bro," said Marut. "Something I learned from Wario. Gaming subculture. I have fully embraced the world of

gaming that I work in. It's pretty legit."

With the stun wearing off, Daisy rose to her feet. After she had gotten the cloudy grogginess out of her, she noticed her teammates giving her weird looks.

"What was that supposed to do?" snapped Neva. "Why are you falling on your butt?"

"I don't know!" said Daisy. "I must've slipped or tripped on something..."

"Uh, hello?!" Neva hollered. "Earth to earth wielder! We're all on earth terrain right now! It's not like we're on ice!"

"What did you even slip on?" asked Athelstan. "I didn't see anything there. Did you trip up on your own feet?"

"Maybe?" said Daisy. "I'm not normally...clumsy like that..."

"Gee, it's a good thing we were here to save you then, huh?" Neva said.

"Yeah – now you don't have to thank me when I save you later," Daisy replied. "Which way are we going?"

"Doesn't look like we're going anywhere yet," Athelstan said, gesturing to a path by a different building.

Six Cyber Spider Bots stomped into the clearing on their multiple pairs of neon red legs. The silvery robots charged up shots of electricity from their body guns and fired at the Kruna, who all split and scattered across the small, enclosed field. Some of the CSBs attacked with rapid-fire bolts, others using larger, single-shot bursts. Though the CSBs had high offensive capabilities, they themselves had a relatively fragile build compared to other MAE robots; and it only took a handful of potent elemental blasts and attacks from the Kruna to demolish the whole unit before long. More dismantled metal and busted machinery now littered the limited space the area had; some parts smoking and buzzing, other parts sparking and giving off electrical discharge, and still others leaking fluids.

"Did you guys know that if you rearrange the letters in 'technology,' you get nothing back?" said Ramona.

"At all?" asked Marut.

"Not unless incoherent gibberish counts," said Ramona.

"This can get quite unmanageable real quick," said Bowser. "I don't know how well we can keep fighting an entire army like this one by ourselves."

"If Warra and Andrew were here, that would make a HUGE difference," said Athelstan. "I don't know if it'd be enough, but it'd still provide a really big boost. At least we're still kind of balanced without them though."

"Balanced?" asked Bowser. "How are we balanced if we're missing water and shadow? That's leaving stone and light without direct antagonists."

"I meant in terms of *physical versus finesse* on this team," said Athelstan. "It makes it harder for them to fight back against us, because they have to account for multiple styles of attack."

"Even so, I think we could eventually very easily get overwhelmed," said Bowser. "We're not invulnerable, and we get tired. If we get caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's not going to work out well for us."

"Yeah, Chrissy wasn't kidding when she said that security would beef up," Daisy remarked.

"Should we turn around and go back?" asked Ramona.

"Not until we find Chrissy," said Daisy. "We might not get a chance like this again if we leave to round up backup."

"But if we end up getting caught here-" Ramona started.

"That's something we have to risk," said Daisy. "We have a chance to end this quick, or prolong things and give MAE more time to make us look worse, as well as give them more time to possibly expand.

Neither option's really good, is it?"

"Both of them sound exceptional to me!" Chrissy yelled at the Kruna Yura.

All six of the Kruna looked to their right and saw Chrissy hover into the clearing on her Spear bike. Neva got her rifle up and shot at Chrissy, only for the MAE commander to activate a shield around her bike to block and deflect all the ice bullets that came at her. Despite the defense, Neva fired off a dozen rounds before she stopped shooting.

"Are you quite done?" Chrissy sneered, deactivating her bike's shield. "Now then, what are you doing here? Just can't stop enacting chaos, huh? Addicted to destruction, as is typical of your kind."

"None of that is accurate," said Daisy. "And we're here to teach you a lesson before we force you to tell us where your Command Center is so we can tear down MAE!"

"Daisy, that wording didn't sound very good," mumbled Ramona.

Neva rolled her eyes. "And you guys always get on me for saying stuff I'm supposedly not supposed to say?"

Chrissy shook her head. "Tsk, tsk. I thought you would've learned from yesterday and been on your way to enjoy what little time you have left on this planet. BUT THE VERY NEXT DAY, I see you again? Well, I've got something that should quash this ridiculous little rebellion of yours."

After pressing a button on her right wrist guard, Chrissy elevated her Spear bike as high as it could go without bumping into the overhead tree branches and leaves. A pair of large androids with realistic bodies in casual, metallic "clothing" burst out from the trees and into the clearing under Chrissy. The android that looked like a male had roughly the same height and mass as Marut, while the female android was over twice the male's size. Both androids featured MAE's coloration of white, gray, blue, brown, and gold in their design.

"I've got a busy schedule," said Chrissy, flipping her hair. "So I'm not sticking around here. Instead, I brought you some special playmates for you to have fun with. Say 'Hi' to Omega Defense Robot XY-M-123 and Omega Striker Robot XX-F-046! For simplicity's sake, you can just call them ' *Big Brother & Little Sister* !' "

Ramona cocked her head to one side. "Why is Big Brother little and Little Sister big?"

"DESTROY THEM!" Chrissy shouted at the robots.

Big Brother activated rockets in his back to launch himself at the Kruna, and Little Sister raised one of her arms overhead to prepare it for a downward punch at the undersized elemental wielders. Daisy pulled off an incredible backwards bend out of the way of Big Brother's shoulder bash, though Marut then took the hit instead. Into the side of a tree trunk, Marut went; and Little Sister's approach and fist strike whacked Bowser into a tree near him.

Ramona's attempts at blasting Little Sister failed when the female android activated the anti-gravity system in her shoes and hovered into the air. Big Brother also turned on the anti-gravity in his shoes as well. Both of the sibling androids then drifted away from the mounds of earth and rock that Daisy and Athelstan slung at them, careening around behind the Kruna and setting up for a combination move. When Big Brother and Little Sister spread apart, they put their hands up and faced their palms at each other's. Big Brother created an electrical spheroid that he pushed towards Little Sister. In response, Little Sister then bumped the spheroid back at Big Brother. The androids went back and forth with the electricity in this way as they glided at the Kruna.

None of the Kruna could recall ever seeing such a technique done before, and nearly all of them suffered a shocking jolt because of the unpredictability of Big Brother's and Little Sister's volleys and the speed with which the two advanced towards them. One Kruna managed to avoid getting hit – but that was only because she had disregarded the androids and rushed at Chrissy. Neva got some shots off at Chrissy, who did not expect the Kruna of Ice's sudden attack. Still, Chrissy leaned her Spear bike so that the ice bullets struck it instead of her. The bullets threw the bike's leveling systems

off and made it descend out of some of its height above the ground, therein bringing Chrissy low enough for Neva to jump at her and slam a hooking punch in her face.

Chrissy let out a horrifying scream on contact, which threw off Neva in surprise and contributed to her not-so-stellar landing. Even Neva herself acknowledged that her physical strength was the worst of the Kruna Yura, so she wondered why Chrissy had such a dramatic reaction to an otherwise light hit. When Neva saw Chrissy look back at her, the MAE commander had the most furious glare Neva had seen out of anyone since Marissa Arkana.

"Keep your filthy hands to yourself, young lady!" Chrissy cried.

"I'll put my hands wherever I want!" Neva yelled, jumping at her again. Chrissy restored her Spear's previous height before Neva could reach her, and the ice wielder caught nothing but air with her whiffing punch. Neva got her rifle up and fired several shots from it, but Chrissy reacted quick enough this time to get her bike's shield active once more. Before Neva could even so much as stop firing, she felt Big Brother's electrical spheroid strike her in her back.

"Good! That's what you get!" Chrissy taunted. "It looks like my androids have this under control. I'll be taking my leave now. Buh-bye!"

Not long after Chrissy turned around and flew away, a sizable fireball struck the rear of her bike. Having already undone her shield, her Spear sustained a hefty deal of damage. Chrissy stopped and looked in her mirrors and the rear camera display on her Spear's HUD, which gave her the indication to shift to her right before a light blast also slammed her. Seeing all the Kruna start chasing after her over fighting Big Brother and Little Sister, Chrissy scowled and sped ahead through the metal forest and jungle making up Somnom Woods.

"Don't let her get away!" Daisy yelled.

"So that's the game you want to play?" Chrissy shouted back at her pursuers. She pushed a set of buttons on her gauntlet in succession to activate a special function.

A short ways behind the fleeing MAE commander, the Kruna got an abrupt surprise when they saw Big Brother and Little Sister fly past them. Both androids then positioned themselves in front of the Kruna while also acting as a barrier to maintain the gap between them and Chrissy. As the Kruna kept running after Chrissy, Big Brother and Little Sister flew in reverse in front of them and at a pace no slower than them. Despite not facing where they were going, Big Brother and Little Sister had the sensory technology to both follow Chrissy and avoid backing into anything in the process.

"Bodyguard Mode is active and functioning properly!" Chrissy yelled. "I have protection wherever I go! You can chase after me all you want – you're not getting past Big Brother *or* Little Sister!"

"Okay, then we'll just junk your fancy gadgets so that they can't protect you!" shouted Daisy. "Duh!"

"Blatant disrespect of MAE's top-line technologies will get you in considerable trouble!" Chrissy snapped. "MAE manufactures only the highest-quality machinery! You elemental barbarians fail to comprehend the revolutionary powers and capacities MAE products and creations possess!"

"So should I assume the same can be said for the other two thousand robots and mechs we've wrecked?" Daisy asked.

Chrissy grunted and grumbled, frustration clear and evident. "You can only stay cocky for so long, earth wielder!"

Chapter XXI

Commander on the Run!:

Chrissy kicked up the speed of her Spear bike and flew away from the Kruna Yura's pursuit at a quicker pace. Big Brother and Little Sister also adjusted the velocity of their backwards flight to keep pace with Chrissy. In response, the Kruna upped their speed to sustain their chase before Chrissy and the two sibling androids flew out of sight in the dense trees and foliage of MAE Somnom Woods.

"I really hope they don't go any faster!" Athelstan panted, struggling to keep up.

"Me too," Ramona said, even more out of breath.

"You guys just chill out then!" Daisy said. "Neva, Marut, and I can take charge of this!"

"Are you sure?" Bowser asked.

"Well, like it or not, you're probably gonna get dropped anyways," said Daisy. "I don't think Chrissy is going as fast as she could be."

"Okay – then we'll stay in touch through our communicators," said Bowser. "Just let us know when you've trashed the androids. We'll see you when we see you."

Daisy looked back and gave a thumbs up to Bowser, Ramona, and Athelstan, who all cut their speed down to a manageable jog and let the faster three of the group kick into the next gear to continue the chase. Chrissy looked on her HUD at her Spear's rear camera view and smiled when she noticed that only half of the Kruna still tailed her. Big Brother and Little Sister slowed their flight just enough to move away from Chrissy and ease closer to Daisy, Neva, and Marut.

"Here they come!" said Marut.

Big Brother transformed his arms into fat drill heads and thrust them at the Kruna, though the moderate speed of his swipes did not present too much of a challenge for them to evade. The real challenge came after the android had done several swipes and pulled away, for he then struck his drill-arms into the ground and tore into the terrain. All three of the Kruna got tripped up from the sudden uprising and contortion of the ground that they ran into, allowing Chrissy and the sibling androids to lengthen their gap between them.

"Whoa!" Marut gasped, activating his Furaito before completing his flop. While he sped ahead through the air, Daisy and Neva hurried back to their feet as fast as they could and used him as a beacon they would follow and catch up to. They rejoined the chase just as Little Sister opened her mouth and blew out a heavy gust of wind. Not only did Daisy and Neva get pushed back, but Marut did too. And again, the Kruna lost ground on Chrissy.

"Damn it!" Neva grunted out. "Get back here!"

Right at the conclusion of that exclamation, a bouncing bomb that Chrissy had left behind for the Kruna exploded. Marut pulled to his left in a roll, and Neva bumped Daisy out of the way before the Kruna of Earth ran right into the burst. Both of the girls stumbled out of their twist, but they maintained enough momentum to keep running. Once more, the androids and Chrissy appeared even further away. This time, they had all but left the Kruna's range of vision.

"They keep doing this cheap crap and flying away!" Neva groaned.

"I'll catch up to 'em!" Marut declared, increasing his speed as they came around a corner. Not long after that, another bomb went off and almost engulfed him. If not for a swift somersault upward, he would have been blasted out of the air.

"You were saying?" Daisy called up.

"Okay – *now* , I'm gonna catch up!" Marut said. He put forth another acceleration effort and burst up the winding path towards their escaping foes.

"Great, now *we're* gonna get left behind!" cried Neva. "I don't have the stamina to keep this up..."

"What do you mean you don't?" Daisy asked. "We haven't even run that long-"

"I've done almost nothing but sit around for the past eight months!" Neva yelled. "This whole past week has tired me out! Everything went from zero to sixty for me in a heartbeat, and you always want to go around saying that stuff like this is easy! It's not automatically easy for everybody else! Some of us have to try harder, okay?! Some of us weren't born as physically gifted, alright? Or mentally gifted, for that matter! Some of us just aren't good enough and never will be! And every day in that reality sucks, and we can't do anything about it because we're just lame! Limited and lame."

Daisy grabbed hold of one of Neva's wrists. "Try *talented* and *limitless* ! Just stay with me and don't falter! We can do this together! There's no possible way you're limited or lame if you're truly trying!"

"Wha-wh-what?" Neva sputtered. "What're ya trying to hold my hand for?!"

"I've got your wrist, not your hand!" said Daisy. "Geez, is that really important? Now let's go!"

Daisy slowed up just for the second it took for her to transform into Nova Form. As soon as her power-up completed, she accelerated and put her speed boost to use. Almost immediately, Neva could feel the pull of Daisy's amplified speed dragging her along. Though they closed some of the distance between them and the others ahead, Neva's scrambling feet struggled stepping with their momentum.

"Daisy! Stop!" Neva screamed.

"For what?" Daisy asked.

"I'm gonna fall flat on my face, and you're gonna drag my teeth on the ground! You're going too fast! I can't keep up!"

"Looks like you're keeping up just fine to me. I'm barely pulling on

you!"

Neva's terror shifted into quieted shock. At this point, Daisy now only tugged on Neva to guide her. Even though it had started off as Daisy pulling Neva along, Neva realized that she had unconsciously assumed control of her own momentum. In awe and disbelief, Neva stared at her churning legs and then glanced back at the fading world behind them.

"But, but...I've never run this fast before," mumbled Neva.

Daisy smiled. "Well, if you couldn't do it before, you can now!"

A feeling of revitalization then overcame Neva, which helped her sustain her speed. Sure enough, as soon as Daisy let go, Neva stayed with her, stride for stride. Even after cutting around several trees, she still matched Daisy's speed.

"What...what did you just do to me?" Neva asked.

"Maybe I just showed you how to do something you already could have done on your own," said Daisy. "That's what friends are for, right?"

Neva blushed. "Oh, shut up before you start spouting off some power of friendship crap."

Daisy laughed and shook her head; and though Neva scowled at her at first, her expression then softened into a smile. Together, they rushed ahead up the timbered path to catch up with Marut, who was busy dodging Little Sister's thrusts with her transformed javelin arms. Neither of the two of them noticed Daisy's Alkemei Vranzer's faint glow, nor did Marut or, much further up, Chrissy.

"I thought we were about to lose them," Chrissy grumbled, pulling out another bouncing bomb. "Persistence won't get you anywhere, Kruna Yura! A 'no' from your dreamy crush will still be a 'no' thirty tries later."

"Couldn't you have picked a better comparison to make?" said Daisy. Less than two seconds later, the Bounce Bomb flew right at her. By way of a swift sidestep, Daisy avoided the explosive

altogether. The bomb bounced several times before exploding far behind the group.

Little Sister reached into one of her sleeves and ripped loose a rapidly-revolving spin top, one equipped with sharp teeth and extended blades that cut through the wind and made a distinct shearing sound with the air as it tracked on the ground. While Daisy and Neva had to pivot their run and sidestep around the spinning top, Big Brother shot multiple rounds of eye lasers at Marut. Both android attacks became difficult to maneuver past when the chase went into a more winding portion of Somnom Woods, with Big Brother shooting his lasers at angles tight to the curves and Little Sister's spinning top cutting back and forth among Daisy and Neva. It seemed as though every time either Daisy or Neva evaded, the top shot at the other.

Little Sister's spinning top eventually lost steam and slowed its revolutions and its movement speed to the point where it fell behind and stalled, only for two replacements to come flying out. So while Marut floundered about in the air avoiding Big Brother's lasers and drill swings, Daisy and Neva had their hands full with dodging the two spinning tops battling it out in front of and around them. Marut got clipped a few times, which egged him into descending back to the ground to run alongside the other two Kruna again. But as soon as Marut did that, Big Brother stuck his drill arms onto the terrain and ripped into it. Again, the uprising of earthen and metal jungle floor tripped up and slowed the Kruna; but at least it also sent the spinning tops careening away from them.

As the fastest one there, Marut sprinted forward and caught up to Chrissy and the androids quick. Daisy stayed behind to get Neva going again, and they got the chance to catch up once they passed over the last portion of ground that Big Brother had ripped free. Big Brother and Little Sister repeatedly shuffled their flight around each other before returning to their steady backward glide, though this time on different sides of the path.

"This running battle thing is getting real annoying real fast," said Neva. "Have we even put out an attack yet?"

"Let's start!" said Marut. Yet another Bounce Bomb skipped its way

at the Kruna, only for Marut to blow it away with a burst of wind that knocked it into a tree. Daisy formed a Crystal Fist while Neva shot off ice bullets out of her rifle at the androids. The bullets themselves did minimal harm, but they served as enough of a distraction to give Daisy enough time to ready her move.

"Eeny, meeny, miny – that one!" Daisy hollered with a boost of speed. She rocketed ahead at Big Brother and slammed her crystallized fist into him for a downward-angled connection that sent the android into a haphazard, out-of-control roll. Big Brother fell behind everyone in mere seconds, which Little Sister did not seem to take too kindly to.

When Daisy cut her speed back to even out with Neva and Marut, they drifted around a long turn and met a flurry of javelin arm stabs from Little Sister out of the curve. All three Kruna slowed down just for the duration of Little Sister's attack, which Marut then responded to at its conclusion with a jump and a Drill Dash using his Energized Air Saber. Her Crystal Fist still holding shape, Daisy chained off of Marut's hard hit on Little Sister with a rushing crystal uppercut. At around the same time the two Kruna's attacks launched Little Sister up into the tree foliage, Big Brother flew back and returned to the front of the group.

In the time that Big Brother spent occupying the Kruna with rockets he fired out of hatches in his limbs, Little Sister caught back up and rejoined her counterpart. Chrissy showed visible frustration upon seeing the Kruna avoid all of Big Brother's rockets. The MAE commander flipped out a few of her Bounce Bombs at once before curving her Spear through a chicane. But because of the chicane, the Kruna did not have to stick to the path. Instead, Neva pulled Daisy through a gap off-path and made a shortcut between tree trunks. Marut simply flew to a high point above the path.

"So they're not as stupid and primal-minded as their practices would indicate," Chrissy commented, watching her bombs catch nothing but trees and bush. "But then that means they're too clever. Even more incentive to kill them."

Daisy and Neva reentered the path *ahead* of Big Brother and Little Sister, which left Marut at the rear of the whole chase chain. The

positioning meant that Marut was now behind Big Brother and Little Sister, who chased Daisy and Neva, who trailed Chrissy. Both androids intended to rectify the switch when they rushed past Daisy and Neva with their respective drill and javelin arms leading them. Even after passing the two Kruna, the androids turned and dove at them again. They executed their Dual Sweep with quickness, but not enough quickness to get Daisy or Neva. When the androids tried their aerial rush a third time, Daisy's reactive Iaido swing of her drill staff walloped Big Brother. Little Sister leaned her flight away and turned defensive the very instant Big Brother took Daisy's hard blow.

"Think you guys can do that chain-magnetism thing on the run?" Daisy asked her teammates. "You do that, I bet I can Crystal Smash 'em apart."

"Yeah, if we can get enough time," said Marut. "Are they gonna stay like that?"

"Doesn't look like it," said Daisy. "Slow down to stay behind me, but work fast. I'll keep their attention away from you."

Marut and Neva did as Daisy instructed. Big Brother and Little Sister had transformed their arms back to normal; and in much the same way Marut and Neva prepared an attack of theirs, the two androids each got busy charging one of their fists with crackling electric power. As both parties readied their moves, the chase exited Somnom Woods and entered a wide-open, upward sloping field southeast of Pi'illo Castle.

Big Brother and Little Sister then split to either side of Daisy, the sole Kruna closest to them, and punched at her. Though Daisy darted ahead a little, the two androids met their punches in a fist bump that discharged electrical forces all around them in a radius long enough to jolt Daisy and put her in a crashing tumble. But before she lost too much speed, Daisy rebounded and flipped back to her feet. She had not regained all of her balance before the androids repeated the technique, but she had enough of it to stretch her arms out to her sides and catch both of their punches.

As soon as Daisy had caught Big Brother's and Little Sister's fists, she skidded to a stop. The two androids also slowed to a still hover,

trying to overpower Daisy's hold on them. Marut and Neva saw the cease in movement and curved to a stop themselves, which meant that Chrissy had the freedom to finally get away from the group. The MAE commander flew her bike in the direction of Pi'illo Castle.

"Aw man – she's getting away!" shouted Marut.

"But, Daisy!" Neva said.

Daisy put out all the strength she and her Nova Form-enhanced body could muster. And for a short while, it seemed that her strength would be more than enough...until Big Brother and Little Sister turned on their thrusters. Then, Daisy's arms started bending and giving. In an uprising of elemental power that rippled through the ground under her and rumbled up around her in silvery seismic shocks, Daisy pressed the two androids back out.

The thundering echo of her roar stunned Marut and Neva, but they kept as much focus as they could on finishing their technique. They had a straight display of man versus machine unfolding before them. Her body turning red with pressure, Daisy actually put out enough force through both of her arms to outperform that of either android. In that struggle, organic seemed to exhibit supremacy over inorganic; but then inorganic showed why it would win. Adding onto the accumulating fatigue building up in Daisy, Big Brother and Little Sister fired up their thrusters to an even higher rate of output. And with that, Daisy started fading fast.

"Daisy! Get out of there so we can do this!" Marut yelled.

Daisy could not do a thing to break from Big Brother's and Little Sister's combined compressing forces in any direction. Not in any way that used her arms, could she. Some quick thinking and strengthened elemental control her Nova Form gave led to a unique solution, one that involved using her *legs* instead. With a swift stomp under her, Daisy collapsed the ground beneath her and fell into the earthen terrain. When she fell, she pulled her arms down and out of the way at an angle of the two androids' fists. That move made Big Brother and Little Sister collide into each other and miss their fist bump altogether, while Daisy had escaped into a hole in the ground under them.

"Good enough!" Neva said. Marut thrust his saber, and Neva pushed ahead her rifle. Their lightning and magnetic ice combined into a magnetized stream of blue-white power that bounced to Little Sister after striking Big Brother. A few extra pulses of lightning and frost through their chain racked up copious amounts of damage on Big Brother and Little Sister. The burst of power that pumped out upon the repulsion release flung the two androids in opposite directions of one another, the machines skidding and ricocheting multiple times off of the ground. Though not in pieces, Big Brother and Little Sister came to rest far away from one another as smoking piles of malfunctioning metal.

"Yo, Neva – we got an OP move over here!" Marut hollered, high-fiving with her.

Nova Daisy climbed out of her pit, panting and trying to catch her breath. "Okay...those guys...no. Between the running and *that* that just happened, I feel like I've been in the gym for four hours straight...which I actually did one time when I had a day when I was really, *really* mad. But *this.* ..this was just stupid."

"I don't know why you thought that was a good idea," said Neva. "You're just too overconfident. You're not a superhero, you know. Are you about to try stopping a train next?"

"If I get to use Athelstan's Odina, maybe," Daisy replied with a grin, returning to her normal state.

Neva smirked and looked away. "You're a total moron."

"Are we waiting for the other guys?" asked Marut.

"May as well," said Daisy, taking out her KY Communicator. "Chrissy already got away, but I think we have a good idea of where she went."

Bowser, Athelstan, and Ramona made it out of Somnom Woods and into the bright, surprisingly natural fields where Daisy, Marut, and Neva waited. The amount of mechanization in the area was minimal,

but the layout of the land ahead of them told them that their current location existed as one of the exceptions to MAE's general handling of their territories. A lack of MAE presence there at the moment gave Daisy, Marut, and Neva a chance to rest after a harrowing battle on the run, though not much time had elapsed between Big Brother's and Little Sister's destruction and the six Kruna Yura regrouping.

"Wow, we didn't have to wait that long at all!" exclaimed Marut.

"I'm surprised you found us so quickly," said Daisy. "That path branched a few times."

"It wasn't too hard to get here," said Bowser. "We just followed the trail of upset and disturbed ground."

"And the charred and downed trees," said Athelstan. "Those androids were no joke, huh?"

"For a while, they weren't," said Marut.

"Looks like the next stop is over there," said Daisy, pointing at Pi'illo Castle. "So let's get moving – and fast, before she tries to make a move off of the island."

Sure enough, Chrissy was busy rushing through the Pi'illo Castle halls and loading a backpack and a thick suitcase. As she hurried filling her bags up with important MAE items and documents, she could hear rumbling and explosions going off throughout the mechanized but elegant castle's main floor. Alarms ushered in the stampede of MAE guards and robots through the halls to meet who Chrissy already knew had arrived.

"Oh, come on – they're here already?" Chrissy groaned. "That's unacceptable. Big Brother and Little Sister failed me...but...you must not..." She pressed several buttons on one of her gauntlets before speaking into it. "Rookie, come to me. Now. I need cover while I get out of here."

Chrissy tried to stay as calm and efficient as she could in rounding

up all she needed to take with her. The gold and blue castle throne room on the top third floor was the last place she went. There, she could exit the castle the same way she had entered; for the throne room had a staircase in the back that led straight to the castle roof, where she had parked her Spear. Once she had gotten every gadget, paper, and portable memory storage device out of the throne room she knew had to go with her, she darted for the stairs.

"FREEZE!" Neva yelled at Chrissy.

The MAE commander flinched and turned around to see the six Kruna that had been chasing her now standing at the throne room entrance. Marut, Ramona, and Bowser finished blasting away in the back at the remaining Pi'illo Castle defenses before marching into the throne room with Neva, Daisy, and Athelstan. Neva advanced with her rifle up and pointed as the closest one to Chrissy, but Daisy was the one that noticed Chrissy's legs trembling.

"We can either do this the easy way, or the fun way," said Neva. "Not like I need any target practice."

"You damn elemental wielders are just so rude!" Chrissy cried. "I can't even stay on this island because you destructive stalkers won't leave me alone!"

"Stalkers?" Neva said. She pointed the laser sight of her rifle dead center on Chrissy's forehead. "You mean 'hunters.' "

Daisy stepped to the front and snatched the rifle out of Neva's hands. "You should've never been allowed to have a gun."

"Awwww, but, Daaaisyyyyyyy!" Neva groaned.

"We're not killing her," said Daisy. "We need to get some information out of her, remember?"

"Hah! You're not getting a thing out of me!" declared Chrissy.

"Well, you're not going anywhere until we get what we want," said Bowser.

"I will not yield to the likes of you," said Chrissy. "I am the

commander-in-chief of MAE. If you think I am not prepared for situations like these, you are sorely mistaken."

"Then come on!" demanded Daisy, handing Neva back her sniper. With a cheeky grin, Daisy leaned back into an offset offensive stance and beckoned Chrissy to fight her. "The only thing you've been prepared to do is run away! So quit this scaredy-cat stuff, and let's go! You and me, one-on-one! That sounds fair, doesn't it?"

Chrissy tapped the side of her face, as if thinking the proposition over. "Hmm... Yeah – *no* . I'm going to try this instead."

MAE's commander-in-chief pulled out a remote with her free hand and pressed a button, opening a slot in the floor near the throne from which several spinning Turtle Defender robots flipped out of. Unfortunately for Chrissy, Bowser and Marut blasted four of the large green and silver bots out of commission before they even landed. Neva sniped one of the remaining two in its vulnerable head, and Athelstan bashed his hammer on the last one with his Odina-doubled strength. The four that got blasted out of the air survived only long enough for Daisy, Athelstan, Bowser, and Marut to run at them and crush them on their softer undersides. Combined, the Turtle Defenders had gotten off barely any charge shots out of their Dual Shell Cannons before their destruction.

Chrissy frowned, anxious as she lifted her suitcase in front of her and clenched her teeth. "Uh..."

"We can do this all day," said Bowser.

Battling robots turned out to be something the Kruna would not have to do all day, for a sudden change in circumstances presented a jarring revelation that they realized once Ramona sustained a heavy slam of pressurized water to her back. When they heard Ramona hit the ground in a wet thud, the other Kruna turned around just in time to evade another water outburst. Prompting Neva to back away from Chrissy, the man responsible for such an attack entered the room equipped with an Energized Ocean Trident, Power Gauntlets, a hoverpack, and a full suit of royal blue, gold, and white stealth armor. The electronic blue helmet with the MAE emblem that he wore on top of his long brown hair did nothing to conceal his face.

"No way..." Daisy murmured.

"That's really him, isn't it?" said Bowser.

"Oh, uh, yeah!" said Athelstan. "Wow! I guess we don't have to look for Warra anymore!"

Chapter XXII

Clash at Pi'illo Castle:

Warra did not address any of the Kruna Yura in the throne room. With his Energized Ocean Trident charged and brimming with cycling splashes of water, he cautiously stepped through the assembled Kruna and positioned himself in front of Commander Chrissy Sindograss. His eyes seemed drained and as blank as his expression.

"Sorry to have pulled you away from your duties," said Chrissy. "But your presence is needed here, as you can probably tell."

Warra was unresponsive to Chrissy's words. The Kruna wondered if Warra even had any awareness to him at all. He seemed...automated.

"Something's wrong with him," mumbled Ramona. Neva helped her up from the spill Warra's blast of water had knocked her into.

"Warra, why'd you do that?" asked Daisy. "What're you helping *her* out for? Don't you know what MAE is trying to do?"

Warra did not say a single thing.

"You haven't been with *them* this whole time, have you?" Daisy asked. "Why aren't you talking to us? We're your friends!"

Warra still did not say anything.

"Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you guys," said Chrissy.

"Why wouldn't he?!" Daisy asked. "What did you do to him, Chrissy?"

Chrissy cupped a hand on her elbow and her other hand on her face, peering up at the ceiling. "Ohhh... Come to think of it, I guess he *should* be familiar to you."

"Don't stand over there trying to be coy behind someone else," said Bowser. "What's the deal with this whole thing?"

"Well, I guess I should tell you," said Chrissy. "One day several months ago in my travels, I saw this ailing warrior struggling to cross a long, desolate field. I still don't know what he was doing there all by his lonesome, but he looked like he was on the brink of death. Someone must have roughed him up pretty good... At first, I wanted to leave him to perish like the dirty elemental wielder he is. But, I ultimately decided against it. I'm not sure why I did. Maybe it was out of pity, or because he looked so depressed and nonchalant, or because of a strange sense of kinship; but whatever the case, he was no danger to anyone at that point. He was helpless and at the mercy of anyone who wanted to take advantage of him. That's when an idea hit me."

"You mean like I'm about to hit you?!" Daisy growled.

"No," said Chrissy. "There have been plenty of elemental wielders that have repented and aligned with MAE, many of whom have proven themselves as worthy additions to the organization. So I cut him a deal. I would take him to a special MAE territory, where we would get him healed up and restrengthened. In exchange, he agreed to pledge his allegiance to me."

Bowser raised an eyebrow. "He agreed to pledge his allegiance to you..."

"Yes..." Chrissy said, backing away towards the stairs to the roof. "I will admit that after he did, we had decided to give him a few...additions as 'incentive' to make sure he stayed loyal and did not go back on his word... So now that that's out of the way, I'll leave you to-"

Neva shot off an ice bullet out of her sniper at Chrissy right as the MAE commander got on the first step of the back staircase. However, Warra stuck out the water around his trident to his side right as the bullet came near him and caught it before it could fly at Chrissy. Warra then retracted his water, and the ice bullet fell straight to the marble floor.

"...leave you to play with your friend here," Chrissy finished. With that, she hurried up the stairs. Neva shot at her again as she climbed, only for Warra to repeat his shifting water defense and nullify her bullets once more.

"She got away," said Athelstan. "You mean to tell me that after all this crap we went through, she still got away..."

"We can still get Warra back on our side," said Daisy. "So it's not a total loss."

"What even *is* going on with him?" Ramona asked.

No one could answer before Warra slashed a sweep of water at them all. The wide-arcing move knocked everyone back towards the front of the throne room, effectively ensuring Chrissy's escape from the island. By the time the Kruna had all returned to their feet and readied themselves for battle, Warra had his trident overflowing with water again.

"Warra, just hold on a second," Daisy said.

As if in direct response, Warra launched all of his water at Daisy. A cannon of water coming her way, Daisy leapt above it and somersaulted ahead with some momentum shifting her to her right. When Daisy landed, Warra drew more moisture in the room towards him.

"I don't think he wants to hold on for a second," said Athelstan.

"We're not actually doing this, are we?" asked Ramona.

"Do we have a choice?" said Neva.

"I don't want to fight you!" Daisy yelled at Warra.

As has been the case, Warra said nothing. Instead, Chrissy's voice came through a speaker in Warra's helmet to say, "I am now clear from Pi'illo Castle. You are free to execute the castle intruders. And by that, *I mean execute them* ."

Continuing his mute trend, Warra gave no response to Chrissy. He

let her break off connection with him. His focus then went to the six Kruna in front of him. Interestingly, his eyes stayed fixed and static as he turned his head to gaze at his six targets.

"If what I remember about this guy is accurate, he's going to be tough to beat," said Bowser.

"Yeah right," said Neva. "We can all sense him, and he's not that impressive."

"But he's smarter and more cunning than any of us," said Bowser. "Everyone, stay extra defensive here. You too, Daisy. This'll be a chess match."

Warra swept his trident down by his feet in a circle, bringing to shape a water wall the height and width of he himself. He took slow, deliberate steps to his left, his Tidal Wall materialized and animated. As Warra flowed to his left, the opposing Kruna shifted to their left. In effect, all seven of them moved clockwise around the room.

"This isn't right," said Daisy. "We can't fight him."

"Too late," said Neva. "It already started."

"Warra! You can hear us!" Daisy shouted. "Don't act like you can't! If you could hear Chrissy, then you can definitely hear us! We shouldn't be fighting!"

Warra waved his free hand and launched the Tidal Wall at Daisy, who got her hands up in a diagonal against it and pressed back when it slammed into her palms. She skidded several feet backwards from where she was initially standing, and the wall would have pushed her farther had she not thrown it down onto the floor. The next instant, Warra had another, larger Tidal Wall ready.

"Come on, Warra!" Daisy urged. "Come back with us! We can get out of here together, like we're supposed to! Don't side with MAE anymore! They don't control you!"

"He's not listening," said Bowser. "And I've got a feeling that they're in complete control of him."

"What?" Daisy said. "No, just...no! No way they are!"

"Then explain why he's attacking us, for one!" Bowser said.

The second Tidal Wall glided wide right of Warra at Ramona. She put her Sun Shield up for defense, but she ended up still suffering a good deal of knockback as a result of the force that the Tidal Wall moved with. While Ramona stumbled with a loss of balance, Warra charged at her and thrust his trident. Neva shot him in his shoulder plate multiple times, which slowed his momentum enough to give Ramona the chance to get her shield back in place. Following Ramona's successful block, Warra immediately retreated and brought up a third Tidal Wall, the largest one yet.

"You better stay away from her," Neva hissed.

Warra stepped back and forth several times within a small radius before setting up to launch his Tidal Wall at Neva. But when he sent his slab of water away from him, he pushed it in Athelstan's direction. The Kruna of Stone felt the force and pressure of highly condensed water bash him to the ground and then splash all over him following the initial contact.

"I tend to forget how hard water can hit," Athelstan groaned. While he recovered, Warra put up a fourth Tidal Wall of equal size to the third. Warra then resumed his slow but deliberate pacing.

"Does it still look like he has his Alkemei on?" Bowser asked.

"I don't think so," said Ramona. "That was the one that made him invisible, right?"

"Sort of," said Marut. "I mean, he still kinda had a shadow."

"But he was otherwise literally invisible," said Bowser.

Warra stopped to stand still but squatted some behind his Tidal Wall. He flipped his trident around a couple of times, his head swiveling once more to shift his gaze among the six Kruna before him. With a stomp of his foot and an upward thrust of his trident, another two Tidal Walls rose and flanked off of the one he still had in front of him. Now, Warra had two right angles of water defense

around him. Only his rear was exposed.

"It really doesn't look like he has it on," said Neva. "But I can't tell because of that stupid water he's got in front of him!"

"It could be under his armor," said Bowser. "He may well not have it anymore, but be alert in case he disappears. That's one thing we do *not* need to fight against."

"Or, we could just not fight him at all," said Daisy.

"Really?" said Neva. "He's not talking, he's definitely not being friendly, and he's not helping us do anything other than waste time."

"Maybe we can just leave?" said Daisy.

Warra advanced towards Daisy, his three Tidal Walls moving along with him. His approach started as direct; but he leapt away as soon as he got to within striking distance of the Kruna of Earth. With an aggressive burst of speed, Warra lunged at Bowser and propelled all three Tidal Walls at him. Bowser got smacked out of the throne room and almost fell off onto the main floor of the three-level castle. While Ramona and Marut went to go help out Bowser, Warra backpedaled and erected yet another Tidal Wall. Six water bullets then formed on both sides of the animated wall of water.

"Daisy! Pay attention!" snapped Neva. "You could've done anything but just stand there!"

As if breaking out of a stupor, Daisy shook her head. Her expression turned fierce and focused. "Beat him now, ask questions later," she said.

"Exactly!" Neva replied. "Now you're getting it!"

Through a thrust of his trident, Warra launched the six water bullets on his right at Athelstan, who lowered his Metamorphic Shield-equipped shoulder for defense against them. Warra then sent the other six bullets at Daisy, and she twisted out of the line of vertical fire into a dash forward at him. She still had the Tidal Wall to contend with however, which she thought she could bust through with a well-placed knee bash; but Warra proved her wrong.

Bowser, Ramona, and Marut reentered the throne room in time to see Daisy get shocked upon striking the now electrocuted Tidal Wall Warra had up in front of him. Daisy flew back into a wild and discombobulated roll, and Warra launched his electrical water wall at the three Kruna that had just returned. Together; Bowser, Ramona, and Marut countered the Tidal Wall with combined blasts of fire, light, and air. No one sustained any damage as a result, but elements scattered everywhere in a clash that rocked the throne room. When everything settled, Warra already had another move building up.

"How did he turn that water...what?" mumbled Marut.

"Look! His trident!" Athelstan said. The head of the tool was giving off sparks and electrical discharge. Right when the Kruna had gotten a good look at the trident, Warra sent a wavy stream of water at Bowser that ended up splitting and spreading at a perpendicular angle in both directions. Warra hit and bound every one of his targets with the water, and a stab through the floating water with his electrified trident shocked all six of the Kruna Yura. Even as the Kruna tried to reorganize themselves following the painful attack, Warra had yet another move in preparation.

"I'll tell ya what – he's not holding back anything," grunted Daisy.

"That weapon is allowing him to use some kind of electrical boost," said Athelstan. "He can use artificial electricity because of it, and that's without him even being an air wielder!"

"Yeah, but it can't come close to matching the real thing!" said Marut. He whipped out his Energized Aero Yo-yo and laced it with lightning.

Seeing how successful the first attempt was, Warra sent out a Wave Ripple stream for a second time in a row. Just as Warra's wavy release shot out from his free hand, Marut rushed at it and swept his yo-yo into the attack's head. Marut's lightning traveled through the Wave Ripple water and lashed out at Warra in a vicious, violent jolt of voltage.

"Can't match that *real* shock!" hollered Marut.

Warra refused to go down, but he still staggered for several moments in a daze. The helmet on his head gave off smoke and extra spark discharge, at which point the Kruna noticed a shift in demeanor in their former water teammate. It seemed as if Warra had regained some sense of awareness that he so far had not displayed since appearing in the throne room. His eyes darted around in every direction, and his face now displayed troubled anxiety.

"I can't...feel anything..." Warra mumbled.

Ramona gasped. "He spoke! He said something!"

The helmet Warra wore went on the fritz for a few seconds before stabilizing. Warra then reverted back to the blank, drone-like trance he had been in. But it seemed as though whenever the helmet had a split-second of malfunction, Warra also fluttered and twitched.

"What's up with him?" said Athelstan.

"I don't know, but he's wearing a lot of metal!" Neva yelled, tapping into her Hien's emulation ability. Using her Chill Sickle, she fired off the Wave Ripple technique Warra had just used. Unfortunately, her attack did not copy the artificial electricity that Warra's Energized Ocean Trident had boosted the technique with. Because of that, Neva only hit Warra with the wavy, rippling water cannon itself.

"Ah, damn it," grumbled Neva. "I wasted a third of my energy to do that? No thanks."

The water burst bashed Warra into one of the corners of the throne room, where he crashed headfirst into a hard, marble wall. Again, the helmet on Warra's head started acting up. When he tried returning to his feet, he looked dazed and confused.

"Who keeps hitting me?" Warra asked. "Hey, Neva? Daisy?"

That was all he got out before the helmet spewed another discharge of electricity. Once more without emotion or perception, Warra got up and leapt towards the throne. He raised his trident and pulsated water all around it in rhythmic pumps, his blank stare centered on a

point at the middle of the six Kruna.

"He's...no, wait – that's what's going on!" Daisy yelled. "The helmet! Knock the helmet off of him!"

Sharp sounds emitted from the water Warra let pound on his trident. From the pounding water, visible sound waves rattled off around the raised tool. The Kruna could tell that a water wielder technique using sonics was about to head their way.

"This could get quite unpleasant," said Ramona.

The sonics move Warra used came out sounding like a cacophony of ocean animal noises. This Dolphin Echo immediately forced the Kruna to drop everything and anything in their hands so that they could cover their ears from the egregious volume. In an otherwise unforeseen twist, the Dolphin Echo ended up harming Warra himself as well – particularly, his helmet. The accumulated damage the helmet had suffered made it vulnerable and more susceptible to further breakage, which his attack added onto. As a result, the Dolphin Echo did not assault the Kruna for long. It cut off early and left Warra reeling.

"I'm on it!" declared Neva, taking aim with her rifle's laser sight.

"NO!" Daisy shouted. "He's moving around too much! You'll end up missing him and shooting him in the head instead!"

"Pfft – please," Neva said. " *I'm* going to miss something like this? You're high."

Daisy did not respond. Instead, she rushed at Warra while he was still struggling under the pressure of his malfunctioning helmet. With the utmost urgency, Daisy tackled Warra to the ground and got him pinned down enough for her to grab hold of his helmet. Not long after she tried pulling it off, a loose trickle of electricity zapped her and made her pull her hands away.

"Aw man – how am I gonna do this?" Daisy muttered.

Suddenly, Warra latched onto Daisy's arms and tried to push her off. A struggle ensued in which Daisy tried to keep her weight on him

and resist his push, but he then made a reversal and put her under him. With a hold on her arms, he activated his Power Gauntlets and sent shocking waves through to her. Marut flew in and rammed Warra off of her, saving her from the excessive electrocution that would have occurred. The Kruna Yura of Air and the Kruna Yura of Water crashed into the wall near the stairs up to the roof.

A little unbalanced at the start, Daisy rose and broke into a hunched dash at Marut and Warra. "Keep him down, Marut!"

Marut asserted himself over Warra and held him in place underneath of him. Warra's head kept moving, and his helmet's condition kept deteriorating. That made it harder for Daisy to try removing it, but she committed to getting it off and grabbed hold of it immediately following the small bout of electricity that escaped it when she slid to a stop by his head. Fumes and sparks continued discharging even as Daisy pulled on the helmet, adding substantial difficulty to her task. Nonetheless, she endured all the jolts and smoke that escaped while she pulled until she freed Warra of the helmet's clutches.

The moment she realized she had finally got the headwear off of the Kruna of Water, Daisy sprang to her feet and whipped it with absolute ferocity across the room and into a wall. Because of the velocity at which it flew, an explosion erupted from the helmet on contact that reduced it to ruined, scattered pieces that reeked of chemical odors. Bowser, Athelstan, Ramona, and Neva all gave Daisy wide-eyed, alarmed looks as she calmed herself down and cringed from the searing sensation flowing up and down her arms.

"Was that last part really necessary?" asked Athelstan. "Couldn't you have just tossed the thing aside?"

Daisy did not address his remark. She looked to her right and saw Warra lying on the floor, marks and skin indentations on his head where the tight helmet had clung to his skull. When Warra started coming to his senses, Marut helped him up. All the other Kruna there gathered around him, their guards lowering when they noticed the lack of hostility he showed.

"Easy, dude," said Daisy, patting Warra on the shoulder. "You're

here with us."

"How did I even get here?" murmured Warra. "Where even is here?"

"Pi'illo Castle," said Ramona. "You mean you don't remember anything about being with MAE?"

"MAE?" Warra said. "I remember a woman taking me to a MAE building...and I was there for a little while...and then...this suit... My head is throbbing."

"Oh yeah – sorry about that," said Marut.

Warra groaned and pulled at his armor. "However I got this and for whatever reason I did, I need it off of me. It's way too stiff."

Daisy and Marut helped Warra get every section of armor off of him, uncovering something stunningly interesting in the process. Aside from his boots and a pair of form-fitting gray shorts, he had no clothing on underneath the armor. Instead, he had dozens of slick pads and locking mechanisms glued to his skin. Muscle origins and joints seemed to be the pattern for the placement of the pads, and the locking mechanisms that had secured the armor sat in between pads. Not long after releasing his body, Daisy and Marut backed away from him in disgust.

"Oh my damn – dude!" Daisy yelled. "When was the last time you showered?!"

Warra blushed and scowled. "I don't know! I'm just now realizing that I'm here and have been in that armor, and you're going to ask me *that* ?"

"Bro, like, they didn't make sure to shower you?" asked Marut.

"Again, I have no idea what has been going on," said Warra. "I'm still trying to remember."

"They still should've had the decency to let you shower," said Neva. "Like, at least once a week."

"Once a week?!" hollered Athelstan. "What is wrong with you? Try,

every day!"

Neva glared at Athelstan. "Hey, back when my family got killed off and before I met you guys, that was as much as I could get to shower! Sometimes, it would be every *other* week! And I still sometimes wait a week anyways, so what's so wrong with my answer?"

"That's way too long," mumbled Bowser.

"It's not!" Neva said. "It's not like I've been stinking up the place! I smell good. What are you talking about?"

Marut walked over and sniffed Neva. "It's not *bad* , but...it's...eh...stale?"

"I would've gone with every other day," said Daisy. "But definitely not *a week.* "

Neva raised her arm and took a big inhale of her pit. She then did the same with her other arm. Surprisingly enough, she breathed in multiple times. "I smell great. It's a natural thing. Just because I'm not dolled up with some fancy soaps and shampoo doesn't mean I don't smell good."

"Right..." Athelstan said. "Well, Warra, what we're getting at is that they should've let you shower instead of bathe in your own funk. But considering all that machinery and circuitry around you, I guess they couldn't shower you. And taking that helmet off of you to shower you would've just given you your consciousness back, which they obviously didn't want to have happen."

Warra frowned. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say that they didn't want me to regain consciousness, because they wanted to manipulate me."

"Yup," said Marut.

"And in manipulating me, they wanted to have complete control over me and use me as some sort of slave or drone?" Warra grumbled.

"Pretty much," said Neva.

"And one of those tasks involved me having to fight you guys?" said Warra.

"You're really good at this," said Daisy.

"And these MAE people that took control of me are people you're trying to stop, right?" Warra asked.

"Yeah," Bowser replied. "Besides capturing their commander-in-chief, we want to find out where their headquarters is. It's their Command Center, isn't it?"

Warra gave a soft nod. "That much, I remember. In fact, that's what the woman who helped me called the building she took me to. MAE Command Center. Yes, I'm remembering my trip there now... She told me a fair amount of details regarding MAE and where we were headed for a short while before I blacked out. If you're looking for their Command Center, you'll need to go to the mountains in Evershade Valley. But before you can get there, you'll have to make it through Twilight City first."

Neva's expression turned somber. "You mean, my old home..."

"They're very close to each other," said Warra. "Both are centralized in the Eastern Hemisphere. Evershade Valley is just a little more north and east. Twilight City acts as the surrogate base for MAE; it's their proxy to ensure that their Command Center sees very little attention in comparison. As far as whatever they're doing in their Command Center or whatever it's for, I can only assume it's nothing good. From what I can remember of however long ago it was when she brought me through there, the two regions are equally well-defended due to their link, and their aerial surveillance above the Command Center makes a direct drop over Evershade Valley from the sky out of the question. They *really* wanted to keep that place remote. Unless you want to try scaling the mountains surrounding Evershade Valley – which are all not only difficult to climb but also sporting noteworthy defenses as well – the road to Evershade Valley runs through Twilight City and Twilight City alone."

"Through Twilight City to Evershade Valley," said Bowser. "Alright! We have our destination!"

"But remember what I said," Warra asserted. "Both places have plenty of defense set up. I don't know what the defense was like for here or how dangerous their guards and robots have been, but Twilight City's and Evershade Valley's has to be the best that MAE has."

Daisy shrugged. "It was *kinda* tough going through here. But now that we've got you with us, it'll be a whole lot easier!"

Warra sighed as Daisy put up a hand. She waited for a high-five from him or at least some kind of friendly gesture, but he gave none. He simply walked past her towards the throne room's exit.

"Yo, Warra!" Daisy called out. "What's the deal? Aren't you gonna come along with us?"

"I can't help you," said Warra. "I apologize, but I can't. Not now."

"Is it because we said you stink?" asked Marut.

Warra did not stop his stride when he replied with a flat, "No."

"Then why are you leaving?" Daisy asked. "We're a team! We're your friends! You've been gone for eight months! We just freed you! Why are you just...going?..."

"I have to," said Warra. "I've seen my future... Farewell."

"What does that even mean?" Daisy asked.

Warra did not answer. He kept walking. Even after exiting the room, he did not stop. And he did not look back.

"Warra!" Daisy yelled.

"What?!" Warra grunted out.

Now, Warra stopped and turned around. In sharp contrast to Daisy's soft and friendly expression, his face looked grim and disturbed. Something about him told her that whatever was going on with him, he likely had to deal with it on his own. When she remembered a very similar situation back when he first left, she then understood

that he had not completed what he had set out to do. And for him, that had to come first before anything else.

"Wherever you're going...and whatever you're doing...we're supporting you," said Daisy. "No matter what."

That was all Daisy said. But in hearing that, Warra knew that she respected his decision. He nodded and gave her a thumbs up before leaving and running down the halls. With the valuable information Warra left them, the Kruna Yura could advance to the next phase of their campaign. However, for the foreseeable future, their water wielder would not travel with them.

"Welp – that's it for Warra, everybody!" Athelstan said. "That's it! Glad we could find a way to fit him into this adventure!"

"Is it a good idea to let him run around half-naked?" asked Marut.

"He had on shorts and shoes," said Bowser. "Good enough."

"Oh, I guess you're right, mister shirtless," replied Neva.

"Shouldn't we have at least given him his KY Communicator?" asked Ramona. "You know...just in case-"

"He'll be fine," said Daisy. "He will... I have a feeling he wouldn't have wanted to take it with him anyways... We have to focus on what *we* have to do. Twilight City, right?"

"Yeah," murmured Neva. "Twilight City..."

"That's...near Sarasaland," said Bowser. "So, it's a long trip east."

"It'd save time if we just went straight there, wouldn't it?" said Daisy.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm real tired right about now," said Athelstan. "All these robots are wearing me out."

"I think that goes for all of us," said Daisy. "But the sooner we end this, the better. The fatigue is something we'll just have to deal with. It can't be that much harder in Twilight City."

"We could camp out by Christmas Village," said Ramona. "It'll only be a slight detour north, and we'd still be moving east. I mean, it'll be slower than just going straight to Twilight City; but, at least we'll have a place to rest and refill on supplies without having to go all the way back to Mushroom Kingdom."

"Alright, then that sounds like what we're gonna do," said Daisy. "Get to Christmas Village by tonight, get to Twilight City the next day by...well, I guess twilight, funnily enough."

"Guys, check this out," Marut said. He trotted back from the stairs leading to the roof with a paper in his hand. "It's some kind of...note? Diagram?"

"Chrissy must have dropped that when she was rushing to the roof," said Daisy, taking the paper. "It's a print out forrrrr...DNA?"

"Let me see," Athelstan said. He gave the paper a close but brief inspection when Daisy handed it to him. "What's she doing with something like this? DNA, gene pools, chromosomes...and she drew all over it with some fairly elaborate markings and notes. And then there's some equations here too..."

"What does all that junk mean?" asked Neva.

"I'm trying to decipher it," said Athelstan. "It almost seems like there's some multiplication and exponents that she's trying to apply here. Here's one of them: Mitosis I equals 'P' plus 'M' plus 'A' plus 'T' over N, times...eighty thousand percent – what? Why is the multiplier so big? Is this for analyzing cancer?!"

"Is it?" asked Daisy.

"I don't know what's going on in her head!" Athelstan replied. "And then there's this over on the right side of the page: 'Ask Doctor Ezhno for his recent method of attempting telomere freezing. Also ask for update on telomere regeneration following Mother Computer's software upgrade.' What even is any of this?"

"Something to hold onto," said Bowser. "That's all I can make of it. As far as what it all means...who knows..."

Chapter XXIII

MAE Looms Close to Home:

Following a hasty getaway from Pi'illo Island, the Kruna Yura arrived at the outskirts of Christmas Village after sunset. Strangely, there was snow on the ground. The air also carried a winter-like temperature. Despite Christmas Village's far north location, the wintry temperatures still made little sense during the present Northern Hemisphere summer.

The Kruna did not understand the reasoning for such a cold summer upon noticing the chill as they stepped out of the Koopa Cruiser, but they kept it in the back of their minds. They left the airship out at a flat section of a hilly plateau overlooking the cozy city and headed into town to restock on their items inventory. But before doing that, they brought Ramona to her home so that she could see her father. When she knocked on the door, he greeted her with a hearty hug.

"I missed you too, Dad," said Ramona.

Leo patted Ramona on the shoulders and stepped back. "I see you brought these other dudes with ya! But no Andrew?"

Ramona's otherwise happy expression dimmed, but it largely remained pleasant. "No...we're trying. Well, we thought we had a way to find him, but that kinda fell through. So now, we don't have any idea where he could be. And on top of that, we haven't been able to actually carry out a legitimate search for him because we've been preoccupied dealing with MAE."

"I've heard," said Leo. "You guys have been getting some mentions in the news as of late. What's up with that?"

"Don't believe a thing MAE says," Daisy replied. "Anything they tell you about us is potential propaganda. They want to make us look bad so that they can justify their expansion and eradication of elemental wielding."

"See, now, they didn't say all of that!" Leo remarked. "No wonder they're making y'all out to be gangsters and criminals!"

Daisy grabbed her elbows and smirked. "Everyone'll know who the real criminals are soon. Their secrets will be out after we've demolished them."

Leo rubbed at his beard as if deep in thought. "So MAE's a bunch of bad guys? That means we should be worried about them being right next door then, huh?"

In an instant, Ramona turned deathly pale. "What?!"

"You know Airebis, Ramie?" asked Leo.

Marut snickered. " *Ramie* ?"

"No, I don't think so," said Ramona.

"It's a city next to here," Leo said. "It's probably bigger than Christmas Village now. That place got built up a ton!"

Ramona clenched her teeth with anxiety. "Don't tell me MAE has moved into there!"

"No, they haven't," said Leo. "They've been there for a little while, actually. Probably before you left with your crew here looking for Andrew."

"Why didn't you mention that they were there?" asked Ramona.

"You were always holed up in your room!" exclaimed Leo. "And we didn't know that they were a problem, so is it really that much of a surprise that I didn't bring them up?"

"Oh no," Ramona mumbled, panicking. "Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no – please no. Not here! Why here?"

"As far as I know, they could be experimenting with weather modification and climate control," said Leo. "Why they are? That's a great question."

Ramona's eyes started watering as she latched onto Daisy's shoulders. "We have to stay here! We gotta get MAE out of Airebis! They'll ruin Christmas Village! We can't let them mechanize this place! And my dad's a light wielder like me! If MAE tries to make a move into Christmas Village, they'll get him! They're gonna lock my dad up and kill him, Daisy! We have to do something! I can't lose my dad too! Not my dad! Not my home! Please, Daisy!"

A nervous sweat formed on Daisy's forehead from how tightly Ramona clutched her, but she gave her a reassuring smile. "You don't have to tell me twice! Relax, Ramona! We'll cripple them before they get to even try it! Right, guys?"

"Of course!" said Athelstan. "We'll help out our friend *, Ramie,* here!"

"Having your home taken over changes you," said Neva. "And you do not need to be changed."

"Exactly," said Bowser. "This is much more than personal now."

"And if it means we get to wreck through the place, I'm totally down," said Marut.

"Do we?" asked Neva.

"I guess it depends on what kind of place it is," said Daisy. "Is it a populated area like Beanbean or Pi'illo Island or Diamond City; or is it a place like Sunset Hill or Mount MAE, where there's just MAE people there? If it's the latter, then we can pretty much just go wild. I mean, they've already given us a bad look. So if we just keep our aggression concentrated solely on them, then we can't really look that much worse-"

Daisy's words got cut off quick when Ramona bear-hugged her into submission. She could barely breathe under the amount of pressure Ramona put on her. For a second, Daisy wondered if she was about to get her ribs crushed.

"Thank you, Daisy!" Ramona cried. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

As soon as Ramona let go of her, Daisy hunched over and panted at

an accelerated rate. "Don't you think you should hug everyone else too?" Daisy grunted out. "Don't forget that they..."

Daisy's voice trailed off when she noticed that Bowser, Marut, Athelstan, and Neva were all gone. When she looked up and around her, she spotted the four of them standing on the other side of the street.

A koopa clerk at a small Christmas Village item shop glanced at the doors and saw the six Kruna Yura walk inside. Almost immediately, he flinched and began trembling. Daisy noticed the scared clerk and advanced to the counter, but that only made him more uneasy.

"What's up, dude?" Daisy said, holding out a hand to the koopa. The gesture was not hostile at all, but the koopa did not feel any better about their presence in the store.

"Wh-what are you people doing here?" the clerk asked. "Please, don't mug me! I swear I don't have anything! Take what you want and leave! Please, spare me – it's super late and I only have, like, fifteen minutes before I close and get off! Please, not like this!"

"Hey, hey, we're not like that!" said Athelstan. "We're not about to rough ya up! We just want some Mushrooms and stuff! We'll pay full price! We've got the coinage!"

"Wait – you're not going to rob the store or blow it up?" asked the clerk.

"No way!" said Daisy. "Oh, let me guess – you saw something from MAE that made us look like evil crooks."

The clerk nodded. "Uh, yeah, on one of their TV channels that we pick up here. You all – there was footage of you all destroying robots and beating people up. I...I thought you were supposed to be good guys!"

"We are," said Bowser. "MAE's just trying to make us look bad to further their agenda."

"Which is genociding all wielders," said Neva. "To put it bluntly, anyways."

"But of course, they want to make all wielders seem worthy of such a fate," said Bowser. "So the worse we look, the more justification they get through the media and public eye if something gets out about what they're trying to do. And because of all the technological advancements and innovations MAE is providing to help further evolve their societies and whoever else around the world forms partnerships with them, people are going to be slow to oppose them or call them out."

"Because why would anyone want to get rid of someone who's giving them fancy gadgets and helping their cities grow?" said Athelstan. "Apparently, flying cars and ultra-realistic androids, and whatever else MAE can invent, are worth giving them free reign to do whatever they want."

"And nobody's actually going to believe us if we say anything, at this point," Ramona mumbled.

"To be fair, why does anyone even need to elemental wield in the first place?" the clerk asked. "Does anyone really need it anymore when we've got all this technology helping us out in everyday life? Maybe you guys should just put your wielding aside and give up using your powers."

Neva scowled. "That's not the point, moron."

"Oh, sorry!" the clerk cried. "Sorry..."

"So what if it might not be needed anymore!" Daisy said. "It's still a hate crime, and it's wrong! Everyone should have the freedom to wield if they want to and are able to."

"Would you be saying that if you weren't able to?" asked the clerk.

"I...I don't know – I guess!" replied Daisy. "I'm not gonna say that no one should swim, just because I suck at swimming. There's stuff that we're all good at, and then stuff that we're all bad at. So why single out wielding? Because we may not need it anymore or because it's

outdated is not good enough, and neither is the assumption that all wielders will try to abuse their power! Anybody can do that. I bet ya somebody could walk in here with a super-powered MAE-brand gun and try to rob this store anytime they want."

A Kritter decked out in leather and sunglasses – despite it being nighttime – burst through the doors with a colossal plasma gun on top of his shoulder. "Nobody come a gutser!" he shouted. "How about a mate's discount on all the exy goods, eh? I'm not here for any of that bodgy stuff!"

"See?" Daisy said to the clerk.

"You there!" the Kritter yelled, pointing his gun at the Kruna. "Jane and your mates! Everything'll come good if ya hand over your loot and coin, and whatever else I feel like flogging from this pit stop, eh?"

Neva stared at Daisy in annoyed bewilderment. "The hell is this guy talking about?!"

"Lair it up, and you'll have to answer to my BFG!" the Kritter shouted. "Tuckers, turps, and big bickies – and maybe some frangers. Give it away without a docket! Or you'll be kickin' the bucket!"

Daisy had her hands on her hips when she groaned. "Why do I feel like you're familiar in a bad way? Athelstan?"

With a quick point at the floor underneath of the Kritter, Athelstan shot some of the tile up and threw him off balance. Neva then rammed into the Kritter with a lowered shoulder, which made him drop his gun. After Neva sidestepped, Ramona blasted the Kritter out of the store doors.

"And that takes care of that," said Daisy. The Kritter screamed some expletives when he scrambled to his feet, but he did not reenter the store – not when he saw Neva pointing the plasma gun at him. He got on his MAE-upgraded Phantom bike, activated its hover function, and flew away.

"Hey, you guys saved me and the store!" the clerk said. "Maybe you all aren't so bad after all."

"That's right," said Daisy. "So can we buy some items without you freaking out?"

"Sure, I guess," the clerk replied. "I just hope I don't get in trouble for this."

"Why? Do you work for MAE or something?" Daisy asked.

"Well, actually, my second job is with them," the clerk replied. "I just picked up a part-time position working in one of their stations up in Airebis; but now, I'm starting to second think that decision."

"Yeah - I'd probably call out sick tomorrow, if I were you," said Daisy.

"Mind telling us what Airebis is all about?" asked Bowser.

"It's an area almost entirely devoted to MAE business and manufacturing," said the clerk. "It's basically a big industrial town, and it's also one of their centers for their television services. But one of the main things that has really picked up recently are some experiments with changing the climate, and, like, making the weather different. And...um...please don't tell them that I, like, was being friendly with you. I mean, I'm staying out of your way and stuff, but I don't want them to know that I helped you or tipped you off to anything."

"Don't you worry about a thing!" Daisy replied, giving the clerk a thumbs up. "Just set us up with some items, and we'll be on our way!"

"Oh, cool; thanks," the clerk said, nervously rubbing his head. "I'm kinda confused right now; but, if you're still the good guys, then I hope you win and beat MAE!"

"Awesome, man!" said Daisy. "That's what we're gonna do!"

"And if you're actually bad and have been lying to me or something, I hope you lose and get locked up," the clerk then said.

Daisy gave the clerk a weird look. "Uh...okay? Thanks..."

The Kruna returned to the Koopa Cruiser and had decided to camp out beside it in the field underneath the starry sky; but because of how cold MAE's weather modifications in Airebis had made the region, they changed their minds and set up some sleeping areas in the cruiser's cockpit room. An otherwise cool summer night in the far north was instead downright freezing because of the organization's meddling experimentation. Bowser and Athelstan speculated what kinds of far-reaching effects and impacts such tampering could cause on the rest of the world and its ecosystems, which kept Ramona and Marut occupied with forming either paranoid or wild theories on their parts.

Daisy was there too, enjoying the whole exchange. But when she noticed Neva's extended absence from the room, she got up from her sleeping bag on the cockpit floor and went looking for the ice wielder. She did not find her anywhere in the airship. Instead, she found her outside at the top of a small hill. Neva had her rifle out and pointed up in the air, but she shot at nothing in the air in particular. The Kruna of Ice just let ice bullets out one at a time at random.

"What are you shooting at?" Daisy asked. "The stars?"

"Yeah," Neva muttered. "Got a problem with that?"

"Lucky guess for me," Daisy said, walking over to stand next to Neva as she shot. "No, I don't have a problem. But you know you'll never actually hit any of them."

Neva shrugged. "I used to do this with that old crossbow I had. Just line it up and let one loose. And then do it again. At whatever there was that I could shoot at. And if there was nothing to shoot at, I'd shoot at the stars. You ever tried being pinpoint accurate on those little tiny specks? You probably can't with those grubby hands."

"What if there were no stars that night?"

"Well damn, man – it's not like I just randomly shoot at things every

single night! What do you take me for? A trigger-happy psycho?"

Daisy paused for only a brief moment. "Then why are you out here shooting tonight? Why aren't you hanging out with the rest of us?"

Neva said nothing. She turned and aimed her rifle at the waxing gibbous moon, executing quick pulls of her trigger. Seven total rounds went off within three seconds before Neva stopped firing.

"You know, if you're not careful with that thing, you could draw attention to us," said Daisy.

"I don't have my laser on," said Neva.

"It's still making noise and flashing," said Daisy.

Neva scowled and put her gun away. "Look – what are you out here for?"

"I came out here looking for you, duh. You left without saying anything."

"I didn't want anyone to come out here with me – DUH."

"And it's pretty obvious to me at this point that you're upset about something. DUH!"

"That means you should leave me alone! DUH!"

"No, that means I should be right here with you so you can let me know what's up. So what's up?"

"Since when was that a thing?"

"Since you became one of my best friends!"

In an instant, Neva's expression and tone softened. "What?"

"Yeah, I said it," Daisy replied. "Whether you think the same about me or not, I don't care. But, you're important to me. I didn't have many friends before meeting you. And even fewer good ones. Just Peach. And Toadette was cool. And Mario and Luigi were alright,

aside from how mad those guys would make me from them not thinking I could help them out on their trips. And my old earth master, Terran...he's been gone and dead for however long it's been. And you didn't have very many friends yourself, did you?"

"Basically, nope."

"Let me ask...those guys that you were with – er, that team of yours you introduced me to in Sarasaland that one night...right before Marissa came and wiped them all out...what were they like?"

Neva sighed, staring up at the moon. "Just teammates. Nothing more, nothing less. And if there was a pecking order, they pretty much had me at the bottom... That's about all there was to it. I kind of hated them for that. It reminded me of my family when they were alive. They were all just like...'whatever.' It's a weird feeling... You're around people for long enough, but they don't even acknowledge you as anything other than just another person. You're just kind of...there. Not wanted...not hated...just, there. It's like, I may as well just not even be anywhere. And then, *other* people...they'll just crap all over you just because they don't like something about you. They don't even try to get to know or understand a thing about you, but they'll still find a way to hate you. I don't know which one is worse...because at least, one of those means that you actually mean something to someone and aren't just a nobody."

Though Neva continued staring at the moon, Daisy turned her head and looked at her. Neva's expression reflected blankness and depression, with eyes of clouded apathy.

"I remember this one ice wielder that was with that team," said Neva. "Anton...he was pretty cool. He and I got along okay. But he wasn't around very long at all. Still, it was nice to have an actual friend for once. Best friend I ever had, up to that point. Until he died. He figured out Nova Form on his own somehow, then got so headstrong that he wanted to fight Marissa and her Sweeps the next day. Wasn't smart. We told him he was getting ahead of himself, but he thought that ability made him some godly being. We didn't even know it was Nova Form or what Nova Form was until Marissa commented on it when she saw him... Of course it didn't last. Just like Andrew. Me and him...well, you know... And I have him ripped

away... Like, how I once had a home. But now I don't. Is that just it? Whenever I have something good in life, it just gets taken away? What am I even here for? For fate to screw with me? What am I alive for? What can I even do? Nothing. It's all pointless."

Neva slumped to the ground, her body going limp. Her gaze drifted from the moon to the grass in front of her. Following suit, Daisy plopped herself down next to her. She stayed quiet for a while in case Neva wanted to say anything more, but Neva gave no further spoken word.

"You know, I used to think a lot like you do," Daisy said. "And to be honest...there's probably no good answer to any of that. For anyone. So I just ignore that stuff and do whatever I want and whatever I feel is right. Whatever I feel like I need to do is what I'm here for. Whatever responsibilities I have are what I'm here for."

Neva again sighed, but in disgust. "I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't grow up thinking I wanted to be some glorified police officer."

"Then what did you grow up wanting to be?"

"... I always thought it would be the best thing in the world if I could ever get to play an instrument, or be a singer or something like that. It probably sounds stupid, but-"

"It's not stupid!"

"It was to my parents. They thought it was all stupid and that I should focus on something for the *real* world. Something that would get me somewhere. It seems like no matter what, I've gotten nowhere anyways."

"Dude, you're, like, nineteen though. We're both kinda super young. We don't know what'll happen in the next five years, even."

"I don't care – I just want to be happy. I'm tired of this stupid life I've had. I want things to go well and not get messed up later. I want to matter to someone and not be some throwaway nobody actually cares about. I'm not asking to be some superhero or some celebrity. It'd be nice to just have at least something of a normal life for once,

one not filled with BS. I'm so lost and confused on what my life has been and where I'm going. It feels like I'll never be able to just enjoy being alive."

"Everything will definitely get better; just you wait," Daisy said. "Once this stuff with MAE is all over, I'll make sure everything gets better for you. I'll be there with you every step of the way. You definitely matter to me."

Neva felt Daisy nudge her in the shoulder with a fist. When she looked at the earth wielder beside her, she saw a smile that seemed too bright for the night. That alone made Neva's own lips turn up a little.

"I don't know how you can stay so positive as often as you do," murmured Neva.

"Eh, life's too short to spend it worrying and getting depressed over things," Daisy replied, letting herself fall back to lie on the grass and gaze at the stars. "I try to keep that in mind as much as I can. I can't say it always works; but, it helps. If you can make it through the tough times, there's always something better on the other side."

"Except for me."

"Maybe it's just going to end up being a super huge, totally massive payoff in the end that you can't even grasp on your own until you experience it for yourself. For as stupid as the world can be sometimes, there's a tendency for some pretty amazing stuff to happen. Just gotta keep an open mind is all. You could wake up five years from now with everything you could have ever wanted. Maybe it'll be later, maybe it'll be sooner. We don't know. All we can really do is try to do the right thing...for ourselves and for everyone around us."

Neva looked away from Daisy and back at the sky above. If only a little, Neva held more vigor in her seated posture. When she let out a heavy puff of air from her mouth and watched the vapors scatter into the cold night, she could barely see any of the stars. But before she even realized how much her breath had occluded her view, the cloudiness cleared up. She could see the stars again, maybe clearer

than she could just moments ago.

Chapter XXIV

Spectacular Test of Intelligence!:

On an otherwise boring early afternoon, Toadette lazed around on a couch in one of the living rooms in Peach's Castle. With her feet up on one end of the couch and an elbow under her on the other end to prop her up, she flipped through the channels of the sixty-inch widescreen TV in front of her. Nothing seemed to catch her attention, and she saw little of interest when she pulled up the guide.

"I can't believe I'm stuck with daytime TV on my off day," mumbled Toadette, yawning.

On one particular channel, she happened upon a broadcast of a press conference featuring Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss. But as Toadette would find out moments later, the press conference had reached its end. She heard nothing out of the supreme MAE commander other than some relatively generic closing remarks centered around MAE's expansion and promised prosperity for all.

Aw man, I wish I had gotten to this sooner , Toadette thought. She stood up from the couch once commercials came on. *I could've heard something important that Chrissy had to say that could've helped Daisy and them out.*

On her way into the kitchen, she glanced out one of the windows and felt thankful for the castle's air conditioning. She could see the extreme summer heat outside tinting the world and making the air wavy. Anyone and everyone sauntering about outside had on minimal clothing, including some people that opted to walk with parasols. They moved with casual quickness, for many of them did not want to have to spend any more time out in the simmering heat than they already had to. From what Toadette could tell, Mushroom Kingdom was having just another average, lazy summer day.

Toadette returned to the living room with a strawberry milkshake and plopped right back down on the couch. She had come just as the

commercials on TV ended. Now, the camera that the channel transmitted through the TV faded in from black to show a mobile shot of an indoor crowd of people.

"Here's a live look-in at our newest television series," a female announcer said. "Stay tuned, for we're just moments away from The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular!"

Toadette raised an eyebrow. "The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular?"

"That's right!" the announcer said. "Get that name written down and memorized! That's 'The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular!' "

This sounds like it'll be something really extravagant , Toadette thought. *Or maybe just shamefully over the top.*

The camera panned all around a spacious, MAE-themed studio room with a full audience and a lively party atmosphere. A grand monitor hung over the center of the stage, bolted to the wall and, at the moment, turned off. With how colorful the studio room and stage were, in addition to some of the stage props, Toadette got the impression that a game show was about to commence.

A being resembling a cross between a plump blue boar and an armadillo with a large, black-spiked yellow shell covered in brown fur stepped onto the stage in a suit consisting of white, blue, gold and brown. The crown he wore had the MAE emblem burned into it, and the horns, tusks, and claws he had combined with his snout and thick, stout build completed the appearance of someone that Toadette identified with little effort.

"Is that Midbus?" Toadette asked out loud.

As if that were not enough of a surprise, the camera then gave her something else to shock her. Across the stage and opposite of the podium where Midbus marched over to, eight other people stood in pairs behind four electronic podium-booths. The first pairing consisted of a Shy Guy in air wielder colors and a Monty Mole in earth wielder colors. When the camera panned to the right of the

first pairing, Toadette then saw Bowser and Athelstan at another booth. Then Toadette saw Marut and Ramona at the booth after that one. Finally, she then saw Daisy and Neva together behind the booth nearest to the audience.

In a fit of panic, Toadette soared off of the couch and rocketed through the castle's hallways. "PEACH! HEY PEACH! PEACH, PEACH, PEACH, PEACH, PEACH!"

"Somebody remind me how we got stuck in this mess," Neva grumbled.

Marut scratched at his chin and peered up at the studio room's ceiling. "Oh, so we came to this snowy Airebis place and got ambushed by a whole gigantic swarm of Patrol Bots and other MAE robots, and they got us with their stun guns and handcuffed us, and then they took us to some studio building and held us there for a few hours and took away all of our equipment, and then they brought us out here on this stage with that pig-a-dillo dude over there in the suit, and we can't move or do anything because our ankles are chained to these booths."

"I wasn't being literal, air-head!" Neva yelled.

The boar-armadillo creature held up his microphone and tugged on his vibrant blue tie just prior to addressing the audience. "Before we begin our premiere broadcast tonight, we of MAE would like to thank all of you – both who made it here and who are watching at home – for making us a part of your summer evening!"

"It's still amazing how you finally learned proper grammar, Midbus," said Bowser.

"Stop calling me Midbus!" the creature insisted. "I am Commander Shredder Ginobli! There is no 'Midbus' anywhere in there! Get it right!"

"Bowser, are you sure you know this person?" Ramona asked.

"Yes – he's a giant ham," said Bowser.

"Literally!" added Athelstan.

"Here we go," Commander Ginobli said into his mic. "Now, live from MAE Airebis, presented in glorious 16K and simulcast in both MAE and non-MAE markets; for the very first time, we bring to you, the audience here and the audiences at home, a rousing, heart-pounding test of trivia wit! Watch your favorite teams battle for prizes-slash-their-lives on The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular!"

While the audience cheered and applauded, the Kruna Yura glanced at each other in confusion. The Shy Guy and Monty Mole pair looked more scared than puzzled.

"This is not at all what I expected out of this," mumbled Ramona.

"Seriously, Midbus?" grumbled Bowser. "You brought us here for a game show?"

"Do you call everyone you meet in life 'Midbus,' koopa?" snapped Commander Ginobli. "Now then, let's introduce our contestants for the first in what we anticipate to be a long run of episodes! We have four teams competing tonight, making for a total of eight contestants! Let's give a warm welcome to our Team Shell, Steve and Spike!"

"Um, hi?" Steve the Shy Guy said. The Monty Mole, Spike, gave a little wave to everyone in the room, albeit shakily.

"Next up, Team Mushroom, Bowser and Athelstan!" yelled the commander.

"Why are we Mushroom?" asked Athelstan. "Is it because we're the biggest ones here? That's lazy."

"No, lazy is putting Bowser on Team Shell," said Commander Ginobli. "Now, let's see Team Star, Marut and Ramona!"

"WASSUP!" Marut screamed, gesturing to the crowd.

In direct contrast, Ramona winced and curled over her side of their booth. "Don't cheer about this!"

"And last but not at all least, Team Flower, Daisy and Neva!" said Commander Ginobli.

"Oh, so me being on Team Flower is somehow not lazy at all," Daisy said.

"Why are we on teams?" Neva snapped. "Why are we on some game show? What's all this about?"

"Team Flower is a real bitey bunch, so we'll make sure we're on tape delay!" Commander Ginobli said.

"The only thing being delayed is my foot across your face!" snapped Neva.

"Whoa! Save that energy for the game, sweetheart!" Commander Ginobli replied. "Now that we're all acquainted, we'll give you an overview of the gameplay, which is actually quite simple. I will present to you a series of trivia questions that will require you to submit responses through tapping your desired answer on the corresponding touch screen selection displayed on your team booth. Your answer will then display on your booth's front screen over your total score. For this first round, correct answers are worth twenty points! Incorrect answers are worth nothing, but you don't lose points. If you fail to respond, you lose ten points! You are encouraged to give a response, for there are *no* wrong answers! Until we say that your answers are wrong! Don't be wrong! We ask that the audience stay quiet during the question and answer process so that no one assists the contestants!"

"Seems simple enough, I guess," said Ramona. "Maybe this won't be so bad."

"What's this trivia stuff gonna be on anyways?" asked Neva.

"You'll just have to wait and see!" said Commander Ginobli. "Certainly nothing you shouldn't be able to answer! Unless you're all rock-stupid! And that wasn't a slight at stone wielders! I literally meant *rock-stupid.* In any case, I assure you that everyone here has a fair chance, and you should be able to put forth a pretty decent performance."

"Okay, so then what are we playing for?" asked Bowser.

"I'm glad you asked, Midbus!" said Commander Ginobli. His response drew a sharp scowl out of Bowser. "I was just about to get to that! Let's see what they're playing for! Commander Chrissy?"

The massive monitor hanging over the center of the stage then powered on to reveal Commander Chrysanthemum Sindograss's face overlooking the entire room. "I'll tell you, Shredder!"

"Oh, great – what's she doing here?" grunted Daisy.

"Where is she?!" asked Neva, wide-eyed. "Is she here? In the building? Where is she?"

"Telecommunicating," said Commander Ginobli. "Do you drive footmobiles? Excellent presser by the way, Chrissy. As always! Everyone loved hearing what you had to say!"

"Lies! All lies!" Daisy yelled. "She spits out a bunch of slander and lies! Nobody should take anything she says to heart! What is she even here for? More lies?!"

"Now, now, my earthen counterpart," Chrissy replied. "Don't get too testy. I should be asking *you* why you're here and why you continue to accuse me and MAE of unfounded erroneous claims. But what's done is done. As for the here and now, I'm just guest moderating this event. Commander Ginobli has the floor here."

"That *better* be all you're doing," said Bowser.

Chrissy gave a low giggle and adjusted her headset. "The participants of The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular won't face fierce competition among one another for nothing! So make sure you post as many correct answers as you can, for the winning team gets to leave with their freedom!"

Daisy gasped among the audience applause in the background. "Wait, what-"

"The losing teams get to spin the *Chance Wheel* ,"said Chrissy."The

Chance Wheel will determine one of several fates – including but not limited to lifetime community service, a two hundred-year-long sentence to federal prison, banishment into space, mandatory recruitment and assimilation into the MAE workforce system, an all-expenses-paid trip to MAE's top vacation spot – Wuhu Island – or, one of many methods of immediate execution!"

"Oh, the inhumanity!" Commander Ginobli shouted amid crowd cheers.

"I know!" Chrissy said in an oddly melodramatic tone. "I sure hope we don't have to exterminate our special friends here any time soon! They have been some of my favorite people!"

Marut squinted at the huge Chance Wheel set up at the other end of the stage. "Why is the vacation piece so small compared to the other ones?"

"NOW, let's get started with The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular!" Chrissy hollered. The audience burst into a roar as lights and festive explosions went off throughout the studio room.

"You can't just force us to play this stupid game!" snapped Daisy. "I refuse to do anything here! I have rights!"

"Nnnnno you doooon't!" Commander Ginobli replied with an up-and-down shoulder shimmy. "If any *one* of you refuses to play, you ALL get executed!"

"What?!" Daisy and Bowser barked through gasps from the audience.

"This is to promote fair play and prevent sour sports from being sore losers," said Commander Chrissy.

"Talk about hypocrisy," grumbled Daisy. "You're always giving us a bad look, but isn't this whole thing a bad look for you guys?"

"Ah, yes, maybe – but you all *committed crimes in MAE territories* ," said Chrissy. "Oh, and guess where you are right now? In a MAE territory. Therefore, you are subject to *MAE law;* and every nation in

the world has the final say in how they get to handle their own criminal punishment and sentencing. If anyone of any non-MAE nation or state has an issue, they can speak with us directly in a different setting at a later date through diplomatic discussion."

"Oh-kay – well, this sucks," Athelstan murmured.

Marut looked at Ramona and slumped. "Okay, yeah, this is not cool at all."

"What kinds of sick and twisted minds would put us in this situation..." murmured Ramona.

"Hey, Daisy," Neva hissed. "You know how you said that we don't know what'll happen five years from now? I know – nothing, because we won't be around past tomorrow!"

"Don't worry, you guys," whispered Daisy. "I've got an ace up my sleeve. We're good."

"Your sleeves stop at your shoulders," grumbled Neva. "What could you possibly fit up there..."

"I wasn't being literal, ice-breath," Daisy muttered. A little stunned, Neva puffed into one of her hands and tried to sniff her breath.

"Is everybody ready to have some fun?" asked Chrissy. "Anymore questions? No? Well, then I suppose it's time for *us* to do the asking now! Let's get started with MSUCSQTS. Commander?"

"Affirmative, Chrissy," said Commander Ginobli, holding up a set of cards. "Here's the opening question! An elemental wielder of which element receives a slight power boost during the day?"

Icons showed up under Chrissy on the massive overhead monitor corresponding to the answers Commander Ginobli recited. "Is it...fire? Water? Earth? Or ice?"

"We're actually going to be playing this game?" mumbled Ramona.

"We don't really have a choice!" Marut replied.

"We have a choice," said Bowser. "It's over who wins and who loses."

"Or we could try tying?" said Athelstan.

"Steve, we gotta win this!" said Spike. "I don't know who those guys are, but we can't lose to them!"

Neva scowled at the Monty Mole earth wielder. "Say that again when you finish in last!"

"My, my, how the clock is ticking," said Chrissy. "Is this a refusal to play? That would mean an automatic forfeit on all sides..."

"Ugh – what was the question again?" Marut asked Ramona.

"Slight power boost during the day..." said Athelstan. "It's typically a little easier for a fire wielder to work during the day, right?"

"Same with stone," said Bowser, tapping a selection on their booth. "But not water, earth, or ice."

"Is it water?" Steve asked.

"No, water gets help from the moon's pull, or something like that," said Spike. "And it's warmer during the day...I think earth gets some help from the moon too. Its gravity makes things more seismic, doesn't it?"

"You're the earth wielder," said Steve, tapping on their booth. "Let's go with fire."

"Fire," Ramona said.

Marut slapped their booth's fire selection. "Fire!"

"Fire for sure," Daisy said. Neva then tapped on their booth's screen to select the option for fire.

"Well look at that!" Commander Ginobli cheered. "Everyone gets the first question correct!"

The audience gave the contestants a hearty applause as the score displays in front of each team's podium-booth went from "0" to "20." With a relatively simple question given out first, the eight elemental wielders playing felt more confident in their task at hand.

"That's right – fire wielders get a bit of an extra kick to their step during the day," said Commander Ginobli. "This applies to stone, air, and light wielders as well; whereas water, earth, ice, and shadow wielders tend to feel a little more comfortable using their element at night. Let's move on to the next question. Shine Sprites can serve as a pretty potent power source for many machines and appliances, emitting *what* from their cores? Light energy, shadow energy, fire energy, or electricity?"

"The guy said ' *Shine,* ' so why would it be anything else?" Steve said to Spike.

"Light energy, it is," Spike replied.

"I'm picking light energy," said Bowser.

"Makes sense to me," said Athelstan.

"Maybe it's actually electricity," said Marut. "Because technology runs off of electricity, doesn't it?"

"Um...okay, let's go with that," said Ramona. "I think...uh..."

"What's a Shine Sprite?" asked Neva.

"Just pick light energy," said Daisy. "It's called a *Shine* Sprite; not dark, not shock, and not burn...if there even are such things."

Neva shook her head as she made their selection. "Why does it sound like you don't even know?"

"Everyone has input their answer," said Commander Ginobli. "Commander Chrissy?"

"Shine Sprites produce light energy," said Chrissy. "Team Shell, Team Mushroom, and Team Flower all got that correct! Sorry, Team Star; but it was a good guess."

"Aw – what?" Marut groaned.

"I can see how you answered that way," said Chrissy. "A compressed Shine Sprite is a highly efficient portable power source that we of MAE have incorporated in the vast majority of our products as an alternative to electrical-based sources. MAE has found a way to perfectly synthesize these special Shine Sprites so that we don't have to import them. Once combined with solar absorption technologies, we may soon even be able to have MAE machinery running on batteries and power supplies that won't exhaust."

"MAE innovations designed with increasing ease of everyday life in mind!" said Commander Ginobli. "Trust in MAE to get you propelled into the new age! We have society's best interests at heart!"

Daisy sighed and rolled her eyes. "Oh boy – here we go with this now..."

"That just reminded me of an upcoming laptop model we'll be releasing in the next two weeks," said Chrissy. "Our new high-efficiency MAE Plasma Core 5 DX will come with impressive software add-ons, including among others universal control of all your MAE-brand household appliances, a new and improved photo album, the ability to backup your entire hard drive onto a free online archive, synchronization with all current MAE phones, tablets, headsets, glasses, and wristbands-"

"HEY! Can we get on with the game already?" Bowser yelled. "We don't need to hear your blatant self-plugging!"

"Ooh, sounds like our contestants are eager to play MSUCSQTS," said Commander Ginobli. "Right, let's get back to it. That's what we're here for, anyways! Next question. If you see an elemental wielder in shades of green, silver, and sometimes even light blue too, what element can you assume he wields? Your choices are: water, air, ice, earth."

"We've got two air wielders right here," said Bowser. "And they're both in green. Nothing else uses green."

"Yeah, what kind of question was that?" Neva said with a smirk. Not two seconds passed before the air emblem showed up on all four contestant booths.

"Everyone got that question correct!" Commander Ginobli shouted. "A very good showing early from our four teams!"

"This trivia thing doesn't seem so bad," said Ramona.

"These questions aren't hard at all!" said Daisy.

"See? Pretty easy so far, right?" said Commander Ginobli. "But now that you're warmed up, let's get a little more worldly! After all, what's a game without some challenge?"

"This isn't a game!" snapped Bowser. "Don't act like you can just play with our lives!"

"Quiet, fellon!" Chrissy yelled. "I'm sorry. Commander?"

"No worries there!" Commander Ginobli replied. "Here's the next question. The superstar hero brothers Mario and Luigi have defeated plenty of global threats! Their reputation as the best and most formidable fighting duo our modern day and age has to offer is unarguable. However, they are not responsible for all the protection the world has received. Which of the following adversaries have they *not* beaten? Is it...Fawful, Wart, Grodus, or Ridley?"

"Whoa!" Ramona shrieked. "That huge dragon-thing is Ridley?"

"That dude looks so beast!" hollered Marut.

"He looks like a beast to me," said Athelstan.

"Big dragon – whatever," said Daisy. "That thing doesn't even look like it's on this planet."

"I've heard of Mario and Luigi, but I don't think *anyone* can beat that dragon guy!" said Spike.

"No kidding – he looks terrifying!" said Steve.

"Ya – nobody's beating that thing," said Athelstan.

"Pfft. Please," said Neva. "I bet he's probably not even that big in real life."

Team Shell, Team Mushroom, and Team Star all selected Ridley at almost the exact same time. Neva crossed her arms and looked away from the group, grumbling and growling.

"I don't think Mario or Luigi ever talked about facing Ridley, but they have mentioned all those other guys," said Daisy, choosing the space dragon's picture.

"Oh yeah?!" Neva yelled, smacking their touch screen. "Well I say, Fawful!"

"They've beaten Fawful!" Daisy snapped. "Twice!"

"Yeah, sure they did," said Neva. "Ridley's nothing! Anybody can beat Ridley! You see how insane that Beanish looks? Who smiles that big?!"

"I'm sorry, Team Flower, but Mario and Luigi have never even encountered Ridley," said Commander Ginobli. "To this date, that is. So, everyone else has answered correctly!"

Daisy gritted her teeth and made an irritated growl. "Neva..."

Neva folded her arms and again looked away. "They'd beat him if they ever came across him."

"That wasn't the question!" Daisy yelled.

"Next question," said Commander Ginobli. "The region of the world known simply by most as 'Dinosaur Land' contains which of the following provinces? Choose the *best* answer: Soda Jungle, Forest of Illusion, Donut Plains, or...Lava Dome."

"What's Dinosaur Land?" Steve asked Spike, who shrugged in response.

Bowser scratched at his head. "Isn't Soda Jungle in Dinosaur

Land?"

"Is it Soda Jungle or Soda *Lake* ?" Athelstan asked his fire teammate.

"I don't know – guess!" Marut said to Ramona. With some hesitation, Ramona picked Forest of Illusion.

"Donut Plains?" Daisy said. "No, Forest of Illusion...wait-"

"Where's Lava Dome?" asked Neva.

"Let's go with Lava Dome," Spike said to Steve.

"I'm stumped between Donut Plains and Forest of Illusion," said Athelstan.

"I thought they were *both* in Dinosaur Land," said Bowser. "If Soda Jungle isn't, Donut Plains and Forest of Illusion definitely are. Why are there two answers?"

"I don't know," Athelstan said. "Let's try Donut Plains. Maybe either one is right?"

"You're taking too long," Neva said to Daisy, selecting Donut Plains.

"Hey!" Daisy barked.

"That one took them a while, Commander," said Chrissy.

"Well, would you look at this," said Commander Ginobli. "No one got that one correct except for Team Star, who selected Forest of Illusions!"

"Bull!" Bowser screamed. "Forest of Illusions and Donut Plains are both in Dinosaur Land!"

"You guys can't change geography that quick!" added Athelstan.

"Allow me to explain," said Commander Ginobli. "Yes, Donut Plains is indeed in Dinosaur Land. Well, *one* of them is. There are multiple Donut Plains in the world – four, to be exact – each a separate

location with the same name. Since I didn't specify which one, that's *not* a reliable answer. There's only one Forest of Illusion, therefore Forest of Illusion is the best answer even though both are technically correct. Team Star gets twenty points from that question, and the rest of you get nothing!"

Ramona wiped at the nervous sweat piling up on her face. "Good guess, I guess."

"Is there a good guess?" asked Marut. "I feel like we're all screwed in some way, no matter who wins!"

"How do we get nothing if we were right too?!" Neva squealed. "What?!"

"Actually, if you remember what I said, I said for this particular question to choose the *best* answer, not necessarily the correct one," Commander Ginobli replied. "So since there were two correct ones, you had to choose the best out of those two. Don't blame me if you guys didn't listen carefully enough."

"Okay, well, screw you too," Daisy said.

"This guy's trying to be slick," Bowser grumbled.

"Gotta pay *real* close attention now," said Athelstan.

"Moving on to the next question," said Commander Ginobli. "Which of the following can a water wielder *not* do? Your options: dehydrate other things, purify water to make it safe to drink, breathe underwater, or control *blood* ."

"I'm not drinking any water that a water wielder messed with," said Steve.

"What has Warra done?" Athelstan asked Bowser. "Has he ever dehydrated someone?"

"We've never seen Warra control blood," Ramona said to Marut. "Right?"

"Controlling someone's blood...that can't be right for a water wielder

to do," said Daisy.

Team Shell selected the second option, Team Mushroom picked the first option, and Team Star and Team Flower both chose the last option. Commander Ginobli kept his jolly expression stable and frozen. Despite all teams having answered, he held off from an immediate response. But when he did reply, he was abrupt.

"I'm sorry – but you all have wrong answers!" exclaimed Commander Ginobli. Each of the teams exchanged muffled confusion among themselves before the commander explained their results. "Water wielders can not breathe underwater. They can extend the time they can stay down through a special respiration ability they possess that filters some oxygen from water, but they can not by any means stay underwater for as long as they like. It just takes longer for them to drown."

"Oh, that's right," Daisy said. "Warra did mention that before."

"But then that means...water wielders can control blood?" said Ramona.

"I don't remember – did Warra ever say anything about that one?" Daisy asked.

"He might have, but I actually don't remember," said Bowser.

"So then any water wielder could control *our* blood if they wanted to?" asked Ramona.

Commander Ginobli flashed a subtle smirk. "Let's move on. Now then, which of the following can a *shadow* wielder not do? Can they control the shadows of other people? Can they drain other people's energy? Or what about turning themselves invisible? Or can they help you go to sleep?"

"The irony in these last two questions is that there's no shadow wielder or water wielder here," said Marut.

"Well, Andrew never controlled anyone's shadow, so let's choose that one," said Ramona.

"How's a shadow wielder supposed to help anyone sleep?" Spike said, snickering as Steve made their selection. "I thought they gave people nightmares."

"If they can help people sleep, Shady sure hasn't brought it up," said Athelstan.

Bowser nodded. "Sounds like a safe answer."

"Andrew sure helped me fall asleep a lot," said Neva.

Daisy still selected that fourth option. "I don't think cuddling counts as a shadow wielder power."

Commander Ginobli nodded at all the selections the teams made. "Looks like once again, you all are incorrect!"

"Huh?" Daisy and Ramona both called out.

"We are?" asked Athelstan.

"Yes!" Commander Ginobli replied. "Shadow wielders can do all of those things except turn invisible."

"What? How?" asked Ramona.

"Advanced shadow wielders can create illusions to make you *think* or *perceive* that they're not there," said Commander Ginobli. "But that doesn't mean they themselves are invisible. They could be invisible to you, from your angle and perspective; but someone a hundred feet away could potentially see them without any issue. On the other hand, scientific studies have consistently shown that people sleep better, deeper, and longer the darker their sleeping environments are. So, in theory, a shadow wielder could use their powers to help someone fall asleep."

"Yo, I thought you said Andrew couldn't control people's shadows!" Marut hollered at Ramona.

"I guess he just never bothered to try that!" Ramona replied.

"Hold on – he said ' *in theory* !' " Bowser shouted. "How does that

count as correct?!"

"What kind of quiz are you running here anyway with these questions?!" Daisy yelled.

Commander Ginobli smirked. "One that tests your knowledge and wits! What else would a quiz show do?"

"I hate this guy," Bowser muttered.

"Now, we'll take a quick commercial timeout!" Commander Ginobli declared. "But when we come back, we'll be on to round two of the inaugural edition of The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular!"

Chapter XXV

The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular! Part 2!:

Chants of "MSU! CSQ!" had sounded off in the audience all through the commercial break – in between MAE promotional advertisements Commander Shredder Ginobli and Chrissy gave, that is. None of the eight contestants reflected the eagerness and excitement that the people of the audience showed. At the expense of the safety of the eight elemental wielders, the audience members enjoyed the game show unfolding before them.

"Do they know that we could die?" asked Ramona. "Just who are these people?"

"Either MAE paid them off for propaganda, or these are some heartless people," said Bowser.

"Or, maybe these are people that actually just hate elemental wielding," said Athelstan.

"This many people?" asked Marut.

"I don't know," said Athelstan. "I mean, MAE is based and founded on a group of leaders that hate us and that have been on the receiving end of some bad deeds of other wielders. For all we know, MAE's population could be filled with people that have had bad experiences with wielders. And if that's the case, then this is justice to them, isn't it?"

"So about that *ace* up your sleeve you said you had?" Neva whispered to Daisy.

"It's...it's developing," said Daisy. "It's not gonna be immediate. The good thing is that I had given them a heads-up yesterday that we might need their help, so they were ready when I called for them."

"And you called for them when?" Neva asked.

"After that first huge wave of MAE robots we ran into here," said Daisy. "And it has been a bunch of hours since then. Provided they used a fast enough airship, they should be here any minute now."

Neva's eyes went wide with concern. " *Provided* they used a *fast enough* airship? Really? That's what we're working with?"

"Yup!" said Daisy. "I'm sure they'll get here in time. I'm really feeling it going in our favor."

"Just who did you call for backup?" Neva asked. "Wait – no, don't tell me you got-"

"We are BACK from commercial break!" Commander Ginobli hollered. "The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular returns for round two among our contestants!"

"I still swear that Ginobli is Midbus," Bowser said to Athelstan among increasing crowd noise. "No one can convince me otherwise. A smarter Midbus, but still Midbus."

"Let's have a look at our current standings!" said Commander Ginobli. "Team Shell, Team Mushroom, and Team Star are all at eighty points each! Team Flower is right behind them at sixty! This is where we are, heading into the next round; so without further delay, let's get right back into the trivia fray!"

"I'm absolutely thrilled," Daisy muttered.

"Mmmminus five points for unnecessary backsass!" said Commander Ginobli. Team Flower's score display on their podium-booth dropped from sixty to fifty-five.

"What?!" Daisy barked. "Since when?"

"We're on a tight schedule," said Commander Ginobli. "And you should have settled in by now. Your delay of game nets you a little penalty is all."

"That was never mentioned in the rules, pig-mouth!" Daisy yelled.

Commander Ginobli ignored her. "Because of the lack of separation between these four teams, the questions for this second round are worth the same as the last round. Contestants, here's your opening question; and once again, we ask that the audience remain silent during question and answer time to prevent interference with the process and maintain fair play. Now, Mushrooms are widely known as a special class of edible items offering a wide variety of uses for the common people. From regular Mushrooms, to Ultra Mushrooms, to Boost Mushrooms, to Mega Mushrooms, there are quite a few interesting effects Mushrooms can yield. But what Mushroom is harmful if so much as even touched? Could it be...Mini Mushrooms? Poison Mushrooms? Invincishrooms? Or P-Acorns?"

"P-Acorns aren't even a Mushroom," said Bowser.

"He's already trying to trick us again," grumbled Neva.

"Trick? That should make the question easier!" said Commander Ginobli. "If a P-Acorn isn't a Mushroom, don't choose it! Would you choose an answer that obviously wasn't the correct answer if it showed up on a test in school? 'D) This is not the right answer.' Is that the right answer? Come on, guys."

"How are we supposed to trust anything he even says?" asked Ramona.

"What's an Invincishroom?" Steve asked Spike.

"Hey, yeah – what even *is* an Invincishroom?" asked Daisy.

"Now you're asking for hints?" replied Commander Ginobli. "If I tell you what it is, that'd just give the answer away!"

"Hey, maybe that means that it's actually the bad mushroom, if he doesn't want to tell us what it is!" said Neva.

"Really, I don't know how anything with 'poison' in its name can't be bad," said Daisy.

"Maybe we have to choose the worst one of the two?" said Athelstan.

"Invincishroom makes me think that it makes you invincible somehow," said Marut. "Let's pick Poison, Ramona!"

Nodding with unease, Ramona tapped the Poison selection showing a Poison Mushroom on their booth's touch screen. "Poison!"

"Is poison bad if it's touched?" Spike asked Steve.

"Acid is," said Steve. "Maybe we should just go with the obvious answer?"

"This should be easy, but the Invincishroom is throwing me off," said Bowser.

"Poison is the safe option," Athelstan said, making his and Bowser's selection. "Though, it's not safe in real life."

All four booths ended up displaying the Poison Mushroom on their front screens, though certainly not without initial hesitation. Despite this and the Invincishroom option, they had picked the correct answer.

"Bravo!" Commander Ginobli cheered. "Let's give a hand to our four competing teams! They all answered correctly!"

Ramona sighed in relief as everyone's score counter increased. "I really wasn't sure about that one."

"Man, we got away with one there!" said Athelstan.

"Good to see *this* question didn't fool you," said Commander Ginobli. "The Invincishroom can be extremely poisonous to some, but it has to be ingested. It won't do anything through contact alone. A Poison Mushroom, however, is dangerous to the touch! You need special equipment to handle those bad boys!"

"Why would someone even want a Poison Mushroom?" asked Marut. "Is there any use for any of those things if all they do is hurt people?"

"I'm sure there are some sick and twisted individuals out there," said Bowser.

"The three-way tie for first holds at a hundred a piece!" said Commander Ginobli. "But will it stay for long? Probably not after this question! Around thirty-four percent of the elemental wielders of *this* race are water wielders, while only four-percent can be fire wielders, and two percent have shown that they are stone wielders. Does this ratio apply to koopas? Piantas? Yoshis? *Humans* ?"

"There's a ratio for that?" asked Steve.

"I guess so," said Spike. "Now that I think of it, most Monty Mole wielders are earth wielders."

"Do yoshis like water?" asked Marut.

"I thought koopas did," said Ramona. "Do they both?"

Marut's eyes darted back and forth between the koopa and yoshi selections on their booth's touch screen. "Uhhhhhh...koopa."

"Piantas," said Athelstan. "This is obvious!"

"Maybe for you, Mr. Archivist," said Bowser.

"Don't pick something dumb, Neva," said Daisy. "Remember that we're behind."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever!" Neva grumbled, choosing yoshis.

Team Shell had selected Piantas, as did Team Mushroom. Team Star had chosen koopas, and Team Flower went with yoshis. No one had picked humans.

"Chrissy, do you have info for us?" asked Commander Ginobli.

Several pie graphs popped up on-screen under Chrissy's head, three of which displayed fairly equal-sized pieces of eight different sections representing the eight elements. However, a fourth graph showed a large chunk of dark blue and reduced sections of both red and brown. The fourth one was labeled "Piantas."

"As current data shows, Piantas are the correct answer!" Chrissy said.

"Piantas?" said Marut.

"That's right," said Chrissy. "Because of their heavy historical presence in tropical climates, Piantas who are elemental wielders have evolved throughout the ages to skew the balance of power within their demographic away from fire and stone and towards water, earth, and even light."

"Damn it, Daisy!" Neva snapped. "Why can't you get these answers right?"

"Me? You're the one handling the touch screen!" said Daisy. "And *you* picked for this question!"

"So?" shouted Neva. "You could have noticed I was wrong and picked the right answer anyway!"

Chrissy gave a low-pitched and fluttering laugh. "This is not the kind of game you want to be disputing over. Next question, Commander?"

"This next one should bring back memories for some," said Commander Ginobli. "This alien species once tried to invade Earth after their home world had begun to experience widespread decay: Slurples, Star Bunnies, Spoings, Shroobs. Answer?"

Steve clutched his hood and mask. "What were they called? What were they called?!"

Spike shrugged, tapping on Spoings. "I'll take a random guess!"

"I asked for their name, not what they look like!" Steve said.

"Do you remember what they look like?" Spike asked.

"Oh, well, no," said Steve.

"I heard about them on the news once," said Ramona, picking Shroobs. "They didn't get to any of us."

"Am I allowed to answer this one?" Daisy asked.

"Don't give me your sass – just pick something and get it over with," grumbled Neva.

Daisy selected Shroobs, as Marut and Ramona did. Team Shell was the only one who chose a different answer, for Bowser and Athelstan had Shroobs selected the instant their time to answer began. Shortly after everyone had made their choice, the monitor showing Chrissy did a temporary cutaway to videos of purple mushroom-like creatures wreaking havoc on the lands and of Mario and Luigi battling against them and their leaders.

"The answer is, 'Shroobs,' " said Commander Ginobli. "Thanks to some prompt defense, their invasion attempt failed."

"Thanks to a fire wielder and an air wielder, you're welcome!" Daisy shouted. "See? If it weren't for wielders, this planet would be covered in Shroobs!"

"Admittedly, MAE already had a defense plan in place for retaliation if things got out of control," said Chrissy. "Their intervention was never needed."

Daisy folded her arms and scoffed at the two MAE commanders. "Yeah, okay. Sure. You guys had it all under control. Back when nobody even heard of y'all."

"Yes," said Chrissy. "Commander, what's the status of the game so far?"

"Team Mushroom is in the lead with 140 points!" replied Commander Ginobli. "Team Shell and Team Star are right there in second with 120! Team Flower takes up last place at ninety-five."

"This game is stupid," muttered Neva.

"Oh, don't be so down," said Commander Ginobli. "We're coming up on the end of our second round, but the final round will give you a chance to go from worst to first! Actually, wait, it won't – I did forget to mention that only the top two teams can advance to the final round, didn't I?"

"Wha- since when?!" Daisy hollered.

"Since always," said Chrissy. "That's the rules of the game."

"Always? THIS IS THE FIRST EPISODE!" Neva screamed.

"Why didn't you say anything about that part?" Bowser yelled.

Chrissy giggled. "I may not have been paying the closest attention when he explained the rules. Sorry. I'm a very busy girl with a lot on my mind that I have to do."

Bowser made a subtle growl. "How much you wanna bet this game is rigged?"

"It might be a safe bet to say that they don't intend on having any of us walk out of here freely," Athelstan whispered back. "But what can we do?"

"Aw man, now I wish we stalled more," said Daisy. "We need to slow down the pace of play here."

"Uh, yeah – is your 'brigade' going to show up any time soon?" Neva hissed.

"Probably," Daisy said.

Neva pouted and slumped onto their booth. " *Probably* , she says."

"Let's waste no time and get this game show rolling onto the next question!" said Commander Ginobli. "Who is the fastest being alive? Is it...Marut Kaze? Daisy Sarasa? Captain Falcon? Or Sonic the Hedgehog? Choose wisely."

"Definitely not Daisy!" Neva said, looking away.

Daisy glared at Neva. "Thanks! But I wasn't going to say it was me anyways!"

"It's obviously me!" yelled Marut, inputting his and Ramona's choice.

"Let's pick that Captain Falcon guy," said Steve. "He looks the coolest!"

"How is this even a question?" Bowser asked in annoyance.

"You're right," Athelstan said, picking Sonic. "How *is* this even a question?"

"Team Flower, we're waiting on you," said Commander Ginobli. "You should at least try to move up the scoreboard so that you don't have to spin the Chance Wheel early."

Neva shook her head and tapped the selection for Marut. "Yeah, well make it so that I don't wanna have to kick you in the head!"

Daisy quickly switched their answer to Sonic. "There, let me fix that for you."

Neva put their answer back to Marut. "No way any of these guys is faster than Marut."

"Did you not just say that I should be changing answers you make that are wrong?" Daisy said, once again assigning their selection to Sonic.

Neva immediately made their selection Marut again. "Except for when you make the wrong answer."

"YOU ARE IMPOSSIBLE!" Daisy screamed.

"Team Flower can't come to a consensus, Commander," said Commander Ginobli.

"Hmm, you're right," said Chrissy. "That's a ten-point deduction. You've eaten up too much time trying to decide, and you're delaying the game with your inability to make a concrete decision, Team Flower."

"Let's dock them another five for that unnecessary attitude the little one had against my head!" added Commander Ginobli.

"Agreed," said Chrissy. "Team Flower is now down to eighty points."

"Daisy!" Neva yelled. "Why can't you not know nothing about anything?!"

"Whoa, Neva – that was all sorts of triple negatives all over the place," said Ramona.

Daisy gave Neva a mean look, one that made it seem like she was about to bite her head off. But before she could say or do anything, Commander Ginobli spoke up. "As for everyone else, looks like Team Mushroom was the only team who got that one right. Sorry, Team Star. Marut is not the fastest."

"Oh, what?!" Marut cried out.

"That honor goes to Sonic the Hedgehog," said Chrissy. "Sonic has been recorded reaching speeds in excess of 2,500 miles per hour! That's over a whopping three times the speed of sound when in temperate climates! And he has the potential to run even faster than current records indicate! Talk about a need for shoes that can handle the speed, huh? No one else can even come close to his *supersonic* quickness."

Neva's expression mellowed out in an instant before giving a remark that further infuriated her partner. "Huh, I guess you were right, Daisy."

"The clock is ticking," said Chrissy. "We have to get these questions in before our next commercial break!"

Commander Ginobli nodded. "Of course! Remember when the Kruna Yura saved Sarasaland from the mentally unstable demon witch, Marissa Arkana? In addition to her Black Mage subordinates, she had an army of 'blank' on her side. Was it...Imps? Hellhounds? Zombies? Or wolves?"

Without hesitation, all of the teams consisting of Kruna chose the hellhound selection. Team Shell picked wolves. While Neva gave the answer for Team Flower, Daisy zoned out. Something within the commander's question sparked an epiphany in her mind.

Black Mages... Daisy thought. Suddenly, she tightened up and gasped. *Black Mages! MAE! That's it! That has to work!*

"What's wrong with you?" Neva asked.

Daisy smiled. "Oh, nothing. I just thought of something we can do after we take care of MAE."

Neva scowled. "We need to worry about breaking outta this place first, or else we won't even make it that far!"

"Marissa did indeed have an army of hellhounds," said Commander Ginobli. "Though I can see how you could get mixed up and think that they were wolves. I guess you could say that the hellhounds were demon wolves. Those were some nasty fiend canines that she had control over."

"They know about Shroobs, and they know about Marissa and our fight against her," mumbled Bowser. "It's one thing to know about Mario and Luigi, but our fight with Marissa was comparatively low-profile..."

"That's just reinforcing what we already know," Athelstan replied. "These MAE guys have kept a watchful eye."

"Heading into the closing question of this side of our commercial break, Team Mushroom leads at 180 points!" said Commander Ginobli. "Team Star is next with 140. Team Shell, 120. And Team Flower, a hundred. This question will be critical to see who moves on to the speed round final duel, for we're making this one worth a whole 50!"

"Team Shell, Star, Flower – this is all or nothing for you," said Chrissy. "You better hope you get the right answer and that the others don't, because Team Mushroom is already guaranteed a spot!"

"And this one's not easy!" said Commander Ginobli. "Finish the lyrics to this song: 'So go on, straighten your cap. Let your toes begin to tap. This rhythm is a power 'shroom.' Blank. Here are your choices. 'You're too blind to see it.' 'Tetigit destruens!' 'Don't forget you're the superstar!' Or, 'It's you and me. I know it's my destiny.' This tune is one of my favorites."

"Oh, who cares anyway?" said Neva.

"Hey, don't go mouthing off again now," said Daisy.

Neva sucked on her teeth. "Man, screw this! I'm sick of them making entertainment at our expense!"

"Just play along with them for a little while longer," Daisy whispered.

"No, this is frickin' dumb!" shouted Neva. "Face it, we're dead! Let's just get it over with already! I can't take any of this anymore! I can't! This is just torture!"

"Commander, Team Flower sounds like they're forfeiting," said Chrissy. "How about getting them to the Chance Wheel?"

Commander Ginobli raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "I guess they're just accepting their loss and giving up because they don't know the answer. That's a shame."

"What? No – we're still playing!" Daisy insisted. "Neva's just nervous!"

"Don't forget you're the superstar!" Steve hollered, tapping the selection for the lyric.

"Oh, would you look at that!" Chrissy said with a sudden uptick in speaking tempo. "Team Shell has picked the correct answer! That means that Team Flower has mathematically lost! Sorry, Team Star – you guys ran out of time to answer! That means Team Shell has jumped ahead, so Team Flower and Team Star are both eliminated – let's hurry to the Chance Wheel before we go over time for our sponsors to get their word in!"

Daisy frowned. "Hold on, wha-"

"All rulings are final!" said Commander Ginobli. "GUARDS!"

Several Sentry Bots entered the room and grabbed hold of Daisy, Neva, Marut, and Ramona as Patrol Bots undid the Kruna's ankle shackles through a special switch at the bottom of the booths and bound their wrists with energized cuffs. The Patrol Bots and their similarly built but battle-oriented Sentry Bot counterparts then marched the four Kruna across the stage to the Chance Wheel.

Daisy got nudged forward, designated as the first one to work the roulette of misfortunes.

"Now then, lovely lady!" Commander Ginobli shouted. "What wonders await you once you walk out these doors? What harrowing fate will you cast upon yourself? What rightfully deserved plights and sorrows will-"

"How am I supposed to spin this wheel if I'm cuffed?" Daisy asked.

"Um...oh, you're right," said Commander Ginobli. "Undo her hands, SDU-10830-"

"No, don't do that-" Chrissy tried to get out. The Sentry Bot had already disbanded Daisy's cuffs, and Daisy took advantage of the opportunity the instant it presented itself. She jumped out of the mob of MAE robots, transformed into her Nova Form mid-aerial flip, and raised a fist with seismic power that heightened in density with each passing second.

"Whoa, that escalated quick," said Marut.

"Commander!" Chrissy roared.

"Take aim and get ready to gun her down!" Commander Ginobli ordered the robots.

"You're not gunning anyone down!" Daisy said. "Not unless you want an earthquake to flatten this whole city!"

"You wouldn't dare!" Commander Ginobli said among gasps from the anxious audience.

Daisy tripled the silvery rumble around her raised fist. "Should I try and fit this in before the break?"

"Ha! Nice try, earth wielder," said Chrissy. "But the most recently updated data on you suggests that you do not have enough power to level even half of Airebis with any earthquake you try to make."

"I'll just make more than one – duh!" Daisy replied, seeming bored. "I've got plenty of Mushrooms to use once we get to wherever you're

holding our stuff."

"Shredder, do something!" Chrissy yelled.

Several explosions rocked the studio ceiling, eventually leading to its collapse over the center of the stage. Debris fell over some of the MAE robots, but it also crashed on top of Daisy as well. From out of the hole in the ceiling jumped five figures; two furry primates of varied sizes and with city-schemed camouflage, one large, big-headed plant creature in protective red and yellow padding, one thick-bodied strongman in yellow and purple Strikers gear, and a lanky man of purple, violet, and light blue Striker armor. The one mainly in purple rolling to the front, all of the newcomers – Donkey Kong, Diddy Kong, Petey Piranha, Wario, and Waluigi – pointed their Bob-omb Launchers all over the studio.

"You can not be serious," Neva grumbled.

Commander Ginobli cupped one side of his head. "Do not go to commercial break – I repeat, do not go to-"

"You guys SUCK!" Waluigi yelled at the Kruna. "I've got important mayoral duties to attend to; but instead, I'm rescuing you punks?!"

Daisy burst free from the rubble that had collapsed onto her. She landed right alongside the new group and near the front edge of the stage, swiftly recharging her fist with Nova Form-enhanced seismic power.

"We got here just in time!" said Diddy Kong. Petey Piranha grinned and cocked his Bob-omb Launcher.

"Yeah, it only took ya longer than it should've," said Neva.

"We had to fight through a lot more than we expected!" said Donkey Kong.

Wario twiddled his mustache. "You mean we had to blow up a lot more than we expected! Heh, heh..."

"Who wants to *eh-splode* ?" Waluigi yelled, pulling out a second Bob-omb Launcher. "ANYBODY WANNA EH-SPLODE?"

"Why are you saying it like that?" Wario asked.

"Because it sounds like I've gotten tired of saying 'explode' because I've had to say it so many times," said Waluigi. "And that makes it cooler. It sounds more edgy."

"Waluigi," Daisy said. "Shut up."

"I'ma gonna unleash some BOOM on this place whether you losers like it or not!" Waluigi yelled. "I'M IN THE MOOD FOR SOME BOOM!"

Daisy groaned and shook her head, and a punch with her charged fist on the stage floor shook the room to enough of a degree to knock just about everyone other than her off balance. The move freed Neva, Ramona, and Marut from the MAE robots. As their energy cuffs disbanded, the three now-free Kruna hurried back to the podium-booths and looked for the switches that would undo the ankle shackles around Steve, Spike, Bowser, and Athelstan. Almost immediately after getting released, Steve and Spike turned and rushed off the stage as fast as they could.

Neva threw her hands up. "Oh, okay! It's not like we were expecting you to help us out or anything stupid like that!"

A handful of explosions then went off that blasted the assembled MAE robots to pieces. There would have been more explosions had Daisy not grabbed Waluigi's arms to get him to stop firing his launchers. When the smoke started to clear, Commander Ginobli found himself among burning piles of metal while panicked screams sounded off from the frantically evacuating audience.

Commander Ginobli stomped in place, fuming and growling. "This is not the show we need to put on! Next time, we're trapping contestants on a game board with mini-games!"

"Serve justice and eliminate these wielders, or there won't be a next time, Ginobli!" hissed Chrissy.

"Observe, ladies and gentlemen!" Commander Ginobli called out to the audience and cameras. "Witness what happens when you're an

elemental wielder trying to get past the law!"

None of the remaining audience paid the MAE commander any mind. What was leftover of the once dense crowd of people flooded out through the doors until not a single one of them was left. Commander Ginobli soon had no one else to look at other than the Bob-omb Launcher-toting newcomers, the Kruna, and his now furious superior looking on through the monitor.

"You had one job here, Commander," Chrissy growled. "One. Job."

"He was never a real bright one, that guy," added Bowser. "Kind of ironic you had him host a trivia show."

Chrissy stared at Bowser and the other Kruna with an icy, furious glare. "This just in: The Mondo Supreme Ultra Combo Special Quiz Takedown Spectacular has been canceled."

"Why?!" Commander Ginobli cried. "This was going to be a hit show! Couldn't you tell by the crowd? So what if there were a few mishaps! I..."

The MAE commander's voice trailed off in terrified nervousness as the thirteen aggressors before him closed in on him. What followed turned out to be one of the most one-sided beatdowns any of the Kruna could recall, with Daisy, Bowser, Athelstan, Donkey Kong, and Wario acting as the primary drivers. However, it did not last for long. Although Commander Ginobli endured a significant amount of physical abuse, one particular elbow bash Daisy gave him did more than just put him out of commission – it elicited a violent tremor all throughout his body that eventually led to his complete collapse.

And it was not a collapse onto the ground in a motionless or unconscious daze; Commander Ginobli's body literally fell apart into a graphic mess of disassembled segments, chunks, and fluids. Everyone, aside from Chrissy, looked upon the pile that became of Commander Ginobli's body with varying degrees of disturbed shock and grossed-out bewilderment. In mere moments, the boar-armadillo-like being had broken down into a disorganized organic mess.

"Uh, D-Daisy?!" Ramona asked. "What No-Nova Form technique is-ss-s that?!"

"I didn't do anything!" Daisy responded. "I mean, I didn't do anything out of the ordinary!"

"Yeah, people always turn inside out and stop holding together after Daisy hits them," mumbled Neva.

Bowser, Athelstan, and Diddy Kong peered up at the monitor Chrissy had been on, only to find that the screen had gone black. Chrissy had disconnected her communications. That left the group of thirteen all by themselves with a pile of organic matter and a bigger pile of inorganic matter, but they knew they could not stay there for long.

"Hey – never mind what happened to this punk!" Wario said. "He's dead, you guys are free – we've done what we needed to do here, so let's hit the road!"

"No, our equipment is still in this building here," said Bowser.

"Then let's hurry up and go get it!" said Wario. "We can't stay here forever! We didn't exactly come here with the stealthiest of approaches!"

Daisy shook off some of her mental discomfort and gave a grinning smirk. "Alright. But before we leave this city, we're wrecking those climate control stations they've got here!"

Chapter XXVI

The B.O.S.S.:

After the Kruna Yura reclaimed their gear and exited the building, the two groups split off. Wario took Waluigi, Donkey Kong, Diddy Kong, and Petey Piranha back across town to the safe zone where they had parked the transport helicopter they had used to get to Airebis. The Kruna headed deeper into Airebis in search of the zone housing the buildings where MAE held their climate control and weather modification operations – what made it possible for snow to fall over the city at that very moment despite the Northern Hemisphere being well into the summer season. Once the Kruna found the sites, Bowser would use his communicator to call Wario's group over so that they could blitz the buildings with Bob-ombs and missiles.

Thanks to their efforts before their capture and the destruction Wario's group left behind, the Kruna had a noticeably lighter defense to carve through that continued to thin out on their way to their destination. Leaning towards the rural side of the spectrum, Airebis was a more spread out city and therefore proved much easier to navigate through than previous MAE-controlled locations. MAE's mechanization of Airebis had not equated to the same substantial build-up of infrastructure that most other MAE territories had experienced.

A collection of low-rise industrial buildings, weather domes, colossal satellites, wind turbines, and transmission towers occupied Airebis's "Experimental Zone," the city's Sector of Meteorological Research and Development known as Emproanakalpolis. By the time the Kruna reached Airebis Emproanakalpolis, Airebis's defense force existed as just a meager fraction of what it was at the start of the day. The Airebis Emproanakalpolis Experimental Zone felt like a snowy ghost town with how little activity went on in the area. They walked along the lengthy straightaway of road leading past the area's gated boundaries and into its main six-way intersection, where several hangar bays stood.

"Anybody think that those satellites are the culprit behind their climate alterations?" asked Bowser.

"I'm assuming that in addition to the satellites, they're flying specialized aircraft high into the atmosphere," said Athelstan.

Nova Daisy took out her KY Communicator to call Wario's group in. "Who cares how they're doing it? It won't matter once this place is bombed off the map."

"Bob-ombed off the map," said Athelstan.

"It's not just going to be Bob-ombed," said Daisy. "And besides that, you think we're just gonna stand around and let the bombs do all the destruction?"

"That would be nice," said Athelstan. "It would give us a break."

"Does it sound weird to say that it's snowing in July?" asked Marut.

"Yo, Wario!" Daisy said into her KY Communicator. "Get that copter over here! Now!"

"Hey, we just got it off the ground!" Wario barked.

"Then hurry up!" said Daisy. "We're at a place with a whole bunch of transmission towers and satellites, and those wind power tower things – there is no possible way anyone could miss it!"

Without even waiting for a response, Daisy snapped her communicator shut. The skies above let up some on their snowy precipitation and showed a late evening golden glow under its cloud ceiling. Even with their recovery items, the Kruna had had a long, draining day. Between the early hordes of MAE guards and robots, getting captured, Commander Ginobli's game show, and fighting through more MAE forces, all of the Kruna were stressed out and without a doubt exhausted. Trying to infiltrate Twilight City tomorrow seemed like an insurmountable task now.

"Is that it, then?" asked Ramona, sweating despite the frosty temperature. She half-fainted onto the hard ground and let out an extended exhale. "We just have to wait now for them to get here,

right?"

"Or we could get started early and wreck stuff..." Marut mumbled. "Not really feeling like it, though..."

"The sooner they get here, the better," said Neva, collapsing right next to Ramona. "Then we can go back to Mushroom Kingdom."

"Not quite," said Daisy. "We're going to Twilight City. That's the whole point of us coming out this way in the first place, remember?"

Ramona and Neva both cried out in whining moans. Marut groaned and kicked at a loose rock, and Athelstan anxiously adjusted his hat while trying to calm his labored breathing. Bowser hunched over a little and folded his arms, appearing just as unsettled as the others.

"Well, what do ya want me to say?" Daisy huffed. "We're on a time limit, and we don't know how much time we have on that limit. We need to take MAE apart as soon as possible. The longer it takes, the worse off the world is."

"This is a lot of work," said Marut. "Like, *a lot* of work. But we out here though."

"I don't know about you guys, but, I'm feeling all kinds of sick," mumbled Ramona.

"I can see how in the battle of man versus machine, or wielding versus technology, those guys'll win out," said Athelstan.

"We're almost certain to wake up tomorrow feeling like trash," said Bowser.

"Could we just get, like, a day off?" asked Neva. "Two days tops? Pleeeease..."

"How about, like, four?" said Athelstan. "And with a lot of food too. My muscles are feeling flat."

Ramona found a soft spot of turf and jammed her sword into it. Marut slumped to the ground, flat onto his bottom. Similarly, Bowser and Athelstan also collapsed onto the pavement.

"I really wasn't ready for this," said Ramona. "Eight months without any intense training or light wielding, and I get thrown headlong into a fight against a mechanical army..."

"I'm not as powerful as I should be either," muttered Neva. "But, maybe more than anything else, I'm blown out."

"I bet I've lost close to twenty pounds since all the trouble with MAE began," said Athelstan. "Rarely have we gotten a break like this."

"Why do they have so many robots?!" Neva groaned at the sky. "How many have we fought already?!"

"Marissa's hellhounds didn't number nearly as much as these guys and their robots," said Bowser.

"Right?" said Athelstan. "Those guys just keep coming with their technology, and their robots, and their mechs, and their commanders, and their-"

The gate of one of the Emproanakalpolis buildings nearby opened up, and a familiar looking white and red robot with plump black eyes and framework rolled out to meet the Kruna Yura. It possessed wheels on its bulky arms as well as the hexagonal base its spindly torso connected to. The shiny clamps it had for hands adjusted their positioning as it stared at the six elemental wielders.

"Look, it's a R.O.B.!" Bowser said.

"-And their R.O.B.s..." said Athelstan. "... Robs?"

"That robot's looking swole," said Marut. "They must've modeled it after Athelstan."

Bowser, Athelstan, Marut, and Ramona all dragged themselves back to their feet, a potential enemy now staring them down. Despite the manufactured coldness in Airebis, Daisy had to wipe away sweat from her forehead. She could feel her body overheating and her muscles constricting. Out of a deep, lightheaded breath, Neva heaved her sniper up across her chest.

"I am Robotic Outpost Bulwark, Battle Operating System Sigma

edition," said the machine, its tone more robotic than the relatively organic speech most of MAE's creations had. "You are not authorized to trek through Airebis Emproanakalpolis, and you are registered as serious offenders on MAE's list of *MOST WANTED CRIMINALS* . Stand down and yield for apprehension, or else you'll be subject-"

"Yeah, yeah – whatever," said Daisy. "We get it already. This place is about to get leveled anyways. So try to arrest us all you want. It ain't gonna happen."

The machine's bulbous eyes lit up pink. "Then face immediate execution at the hands of R.O.B.-B.O.S.S."

The very next second, a pink outline flickered in translucent sections throughout R.O.B.'s body. The light power gathering around R.O.B.'s eyes bolstered several times its original size in a matter of moments. As R.O.B. pulled its head back in preparation to release the accumulated power, the Kruna all split away from its line of sight. Their maneuver saved them from a wall of light with more width and height than Bowser and Athelstan combined. Though the colossal laser column that the robot shot out did not last long, it packed enough power to burn through the air in its way and rip a huge hole in a building far behind the Kruna.

Ramona's eyes went as wide as they could go. "Was that really necessary?"

"Thanks for the giant 'Go Die Laser,' rust bucket!" Neva yelled.

"See, that right there is why weave game is important," said Marut. "Otherwise, we would've ended up extra crispy."

R.O.B.-B.O.S.S. readied the exact same titanic laser and rotated its head at Neva, though the width of the attack could also catch Daisy and Marut as well. All three targeted Kruna evaded R.O.B.'s Omega Cannon out of rolls and dives; but despite avoiding harm, all three of them were slow to get up. Too slow, in fact. R.O.B. wheeled at the downed Kruna with its arms swinging up and down in vicious diagonal swipes.

"OBLITERATE, OBLITERATE, *CRUUUUUSH* !" shouted R.O.B.

Right as the robot neared Daisy, Athelstan's Mountain Hammer spun at it and bashed it off of its wheeled base. A Fanning Torch fireball from Bowser and a light burst from Ramona blasted R.O.B. further away from their friends into a series of off-balance tumbles that brought it to a rest on its side; but it did not stay down for long. The Kruna watched the robot rock itself to a point where it could use the thrusters on the underside of its base to lift off the ground.

"Malicious elemental wielders!" R.O.B. screeched. It prepared and launched a third Omega Cannon at Bowser, Athelstan, and Ramona; the force from the laser's release pushing R.O.B. backwards in its aerial hover. Though exceptional in defense, none of the targeted three Kruna wanted to attempt blocking against such a monstrous beam. They ran from the Omega Cannon's aim, and Bowser and Ramona kept running when R.O.B. dragged its laser in their direction. R.O.B. seemed more careful with its beam, for it cut the attack off early to avoid damaging another building.

"Remain stationary, meat bags!" demanded R.O.B., electricity sizzling in its clawed wheel-hands. "Further damage to Airebis Emproanakalpolis structures will result in direct compensation out of your bank accounts upon your capture and extermination!"

"Oh, so we didn't have to pay for structural damages *before* if we died?" said Athelstan.

As Daisy tossed Athelstan his hammer, R.O.B. raised its arms and shot off orange electrical orbs at him. Catching his hammer, Athelstan leaned his Metamorphic Shield down for it to take the electric orbs. Unfortunately for him, the electricity splattered and scattered past his shield, so he got shocked regardless of his defenses.

R.O.B. boosted at Athelstan, its arms once more manically attacking through the air as it flew. Bowser cut in front of Athelstan and countered R.O.B.'s offensive with a shell spin, which the Kruna of Fire then followed up with Blazer Claw swings. Daisy chained off of Bowser's counterattack with an Iaido drill staff smack, and Marut continued the combo with a multithrust of his Energized Air Saber.

Some miscommunication between Ramona and Neva left the combo hanging without a proper finisher, for both Kruna seemed either slow or reluctant to attack. As a consequence, R.O.B. hovered out of immediate reach of the Kruna to a soft landing on the ground.

"What are you looking at me for?" Neva snapped at Ramona. "That was all you! Marut pushed it in your direction!"

"I wasn't ready!" Ramona cried. "I thought you had it covered!"

"It's alright – neither of you need to worry about it," said Daisy. "It doesn't look like we really did much to him anyways."

Daisy was right. What would have been a solid string of attacks earlier in the day on other enemies left little behind on R.O.B.-B.O.S.S.'s body. On top of that, everyone who had just attacked looked even more gassed.

"This is definitely a beefed up R.O.B. compared to what I've seen of them before," said Bowser.

"Beefed up or not, we still should've done more to it," said Daisy.

"Pitiful resistance," said R.O.B. "Your powers are reading far below what your data suggests. Are you diseased?"

Athelstan shook off the last of his stun and frowned in confusion. "What's making you think we're sick?"

"Perhaps there were errors in the latest updates to your stats," said R.O.B. "Unless you are impostors and not the real Kruna Yura, your current power levels are – compared to your recorded data – pathetic."

Neva scowled. "What'd you just say?"

"Your powers are far below what have been considered your standards," R.O.B. said. "I reiterate – you are pathetic."

"Then here – have a Power Shot!" Neva yelled, firing her rifle at R.O.B. The explosive ice bullet burst open on contact with R.O.B., spraying ice over much of its body. Sadly, the attack did not amount

to as much as would have been anticipated from its sound and spectacular visual effects.

"Power Shot? How about Pathetic Shot," said R.O.B. It then shot off small lasers from its eyes up into the sky as it laughed, merely as a taunting gesture rather than an actual move.

"Is he actually mocking us?" said Bowser.

"If he wasn't already," said Daisy.

"The people in MAE that developed these robots are the worst," said Athelstan. "How are they going to go and give 'em the capacity to taunt, of all things?!"

The battle – or rather, the one-sided skirmish – went on for a while, with few attacks from the Kruna doing any harm. Not only did the Kruna seem weaker, but they reacted slower, produced less force, and only continued to deteriorate as time passed. One by one, each of them hit a wall – some literally. Their fight then devolved into them just trying to defend and outlast the lasers, arm and base rockets, electricity, wild melee attacks, and grapples R.O.B. whipped out. The Kruna could do little to restore their vitality. Even advanced recovery items failed to rejuvenate the Kruna; and by now, they had exhausted the power reserves their special elemental tools had. Daisy's Nova state kept her marginally fresher than the others in comparison, but that failed to work in their favor.

R.O.B. looked upon its scattered, fatigued opponents, its eye lasers charging up energy to pump out another Omega Cannon. "Obliteration imminent, water sacks. Commander-in-Chief Chrysanthemum Sindograss will decide what to do with your charred remains."

"I'm not letting anybody do anything to any remains of mine!" shouted Marut.

"TOO BAD," R.O.B. responded. Its Omega Cannon erupted out of its eyes straight at Marut, who flew overhead of the enormous pink energy beam and let it crash into a distant Emproanakalpolis building in the background.

"STOP DOING THAT," R.O.B. blared.

"What? You want us to just stand around and take it?" asked Daisy.

"YES," R.O.B. replied. "That's all you're good for."

R.O.B. pulled out a four-pronged claw from the central hatch in its torso, from which electrical bursts flew. With Ramona and Marut out of range, the attack branched out in flickering extensions and zapped Daisy, Bowser, Athelstan, and Neva. Before the four shocked Kruna even collapsed onto the ground, R.O.B. once more prepared its Omega Cannon. The MAE combat robot had enough width in its blast to catch both Daisy and Bowser, two Kruna relatively close to one another; so it rotated and pivoted its head to aim its charging eyes at them. Astonishingly, R.O.B. released its huge laser column much earlier than expected compared to its previous uses of the attack.

Maybe even more astonishing, Ramona dashed in front of the downed and targeted two Kruna in time to put her Sun Shield against it. Upon contact, Ramona shuttled an astounding amount of light energy through to her shield given how drained her and the other Kruna were. Her efforts stalled the Omega Cannon and expanded the scope with which her defense blocked, and her sustained output of light staved the attack off for the remainder of its run. By the end of the Omega Cannon, Daisy and Bowser lay on the ground without any further harm done to them. They both, along with Marut, Neva, and Athelstan, stared at Ramona and her light-expanded Sun Shield in awe.

"Ramona?!" Daisy said.

"Thanks for making that look easy," grumbled Bowser.

"How did you have enough left over for that?!" Neva hollered.

Ramona shuddered, gasping for air and trying to maintain the balance in her wobbling body. "I had to...protect Daisy and Bowser..."

"Sudden surge in power detected and unaccounted for," said R.O.B.

"Data recorded. Compounding data and sending it back to Universal Database."

"I am getting so sick of you tech heads and your stupid Universal Database!" Daisy yelled. "You MAE creeps are a bunch of stalkers that have nothing better to do than study people and breach their privacy!"

"Explain the countless renovations, products, inventions, and innovations MAE is responsible for," said R.O.B. "MAE has far more important things to do than monitor you worthless carbon-based jelly bags."

"This R.O.B. doesn't hold his tongue at all," mumbled Athelstan.

"That's because it doesn't have a tongue to hold," said Neva.

"Or...does it?" said Bowser.

"Ugh – no, I don't wanna think about some robot tongue!" shouted Marut.

"Good – think about how we're gonna combat that," Daisy said, pointing at R.O.B.

R.O.B.-B.O.S.S. had jammed its arms into the ground and now worked on shifting its thrusters above its hexagonal base to point behind and away from itself. Its torso underwent a slight transformation while also attaining gold and blue glows throughout the translucent sections and tubules running through much of its exoskeleton. Waves of power emitted from R.O.B. in excess, generating wind from its growing frequency and wattage.

"What's it doing?" asked Neva.

"Looks like something big," said Bowser, R.O.B.'s head now perpendicular to the ground.

"Daisy, what should we do?" Ramona asked.

"Uh...you know, that's a good question," said Daisy. "And good questions need good answers!"

The power output coming from R.O.B.'s building Ultra Diffusion Beam steadily increased. Weary and beyond tired, none of the Kruna seemed capable of doing anything to offset or counter what would likely be R.O.B.'s most powerful attack yet by far.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any good answers for this," Daisy finished.

"Retreat?" suggested Athelstan.

"That's the worst answer anyone could've come up with!" Daisy replied.

"Why aren't *you* coming up with anything better?" said Neva.

Daisy's expression turned disgruntled as she glanced all around their current area. At this point, her Nova Form status mattered little. No one seemed able to put forth the power needed for a big-time elemental combination attack; and, perhaps worse, no one knew how much longer R.O.B. needed to charge its Ultra Diffusion Beam.

"Are you telling me that there's nothing more you can do with your Nova Form?!" barked Neva. "You've done all you can ever do with it? There's not anything else special it can do?!"

The question made Daisy curious. Not once had she wondered if her Nova Form was capable of doing more than she already knew of it. Nova Form provided a sharp, considerable boost to her already high strength, speed, power, agility, and endurance; and it made utilizing her elemental powers exponentially easier and quicker. And with the introduction of her Full Power Nova Form, what had become a standard for her thanks to Geno, she could stay in the state indefinitely and not expend power whenever she decided to transform. However, it seemed like such great positives have either been rendered irrelevant or not substantial enough on more than one occasion since obtaining the enhanced Nova Form state, their current situation being one such instance. For what has been considered such a rare and elite ability throughout history – and even despite removing the concern of it consuming a lot of energy to maintain – Nova Form has shown to still be limited.

"Hey?! Ya gonna say something?!" Neva screamed amid gusts and atmospheric disturbance coming from R.O.B. "Of all times, why are ya blanking out now?!"

"Huh?" Daisy mumbled. Her eyes flared open and she shook her head out, refocusing on the situation at hand. The very next thing she knew, she heard explosions; though the explosions did not come from R.O.B.'s attack. In fact, R.O.B.'s charging of its Ultra Diffusion Beam stalled.

The explosions came closer, one going off every second. Though the explosions had no clear trajectory, the Kruna saw that the erupting bursts all stuck relatively close together. Other than the immediate area where the Kruna had been fighting against R.O.B.-B.O.S.S., Airebis Emproanakalpolis had stayed silent up until this point.

"Adjusting to new target," said R.O.B., shifting its head.

To the great relief of the Kruna Yura, the transport copter they had been waiting for now neared their location. With Wario piloting the copter; Waluigi, Donkey Kong, and Petey all stood at the open sides with their Bob-omb Launchers aimed and fired at several of the Emproanakalpolis buildings. Diddy Kong sat up in the rear of the copter, controlling the vehicle's missiles.

"Ah, come on, Nova Form!" Daisy grunted when she saw R.O.B. aiming at the helicopter. "I need to do more! I've got to be capable of more!"

The silver rumble of Daisy's elemental energy whirled up around her, more flickery and less potent than earlier in the day. She raised a fist and focused as much seismic power into it as she could, all while R.O.B. reignited its charging sequence.

"Daisy, what are you trying to do?" asked Athelstan.

"Shake the ground!" Daisy said.

Athelstan got his hammer up and positioned it for a strike, faint brown and tan energy streaks jutting off of its head. "I'm putting all

I've got left into this one. I don't have enough to use my Odina, so it's just going straight into my hammer!"

Waluigi laughed like a madman, firing Bob-ombs down on Airebis Emproanakalpolis out of both of the launchers he carried. He went on without any care for where he aimed, but he ended up stopping once he had to refill his launchers with more Bob-ombs. While Waluigi reloaded, Wario steered the helicopter toward the Kruna Yura and into a still hover high overhead of them. The Kruna could feel the fierce downdraft coming from the copter's blades as they saw and heard explosives fly and go off on the buildings all around them.

"Pull back!" Bowser yelled up. "You're directly in R.O.B.'s sight!"

"Can't charge any longer!" Daisy yelled at Athelstan. "Just hit it!"

Athelstan nodded, and he and Daisy both struck the ground at about the same time. Through her powered-up fist and his charged hammer, Daisy and Athelstan directed their force and power through the grass and pavement at R.O.B.-B.O.S.S., effectively shaking and jolting the ground beneath it to dislodge it from its tightened anchorage. But just as R.O.B. lost its supportive hold, it shot off a partial Ultra Diffusion Beam at the copter above. Still, none of the dozens of destructive streaks of golden energy caught the copter. The Ultra Diffusion Beam fizzled past the helicopter, missing the vehicle's rotors by the smallest of margins.

"Whoa, that was hot!" screamed Diddy. "I could feel that! And it didn't even hit us!"

"I say we blitz that bot!" said Waluigi. "It was clearly trying to take us out!"

Wario turned on the speakers to the helicopter to speak to the Kruna. "You all may want to back up before we maul that robot!"

"Sounds good to me!" said Neva.

Without much second thought between the six of them, the Kruna Yura regrouped and distanced themselves from R.O.B.; but they

had to backpedal and keep their eyes on the robot, for it re-anchored its arms and base onto the ground to resume operating its Ultra Diffusion Beam. Right as a rain of Bob-ombs and missiles began falling on R.O.B., the robot unleashed its devastating attack for a second time. Considering the speed and dozens of branching sections that the Ultra Diffusion Beam traveled in, each of the Kruna should have succumbed to critical burning as a result.

Except none of them did. Not a single one of the Kruna got hit. Miraculously, the Ultra Diffusion Beam missed all of the Kruna Yura. They *should* have gotten hit, but they did not. All of them knew that they *would* , yet they did not. The branching and irregular movement of the Ultra Diffusion Beam had already shown its unpredictability on the shot intended for the transport helicopter. Somehow, between the time of its release to the time it reached the Kruna, the blasts of the Ultra Diffusion Beam had branched and bent in a manner that bypassed each of the wielders without touching any of them.

The Kruna stopped their movement in utter bewilderment over the Ultra Diffusion Beam passing them as Bob-ombs and missiles from above battered and blew R.O.B.-B.O.S.S. to pieces. Soon, the robot existed as nothing more than a flaming pile of burning scrap metal. Wario then eased the copter out over the rest of Airebis Emproanakalpolis for his partners to bomb, leaving the Kruna stupefied over the outcome of the previous sequence of events.

"I...I just saw a bright, hot laser...shoot at me, and then bend away..." mumbled Neva.

"I just saw my life flash before my eyes," Ramona murmured.

"Nah, I just saw what Neva saw," said Marut.

"That didn't hit *any* of us?" said Athelstan.

"It didn't..." Daisy said. She peered at each of her teammates, and they looked at one another too.

"There was no way any of us could have avoided that," said Bowser.

"Well, it avoided us instead," said Athelstan. "Did we do something

to make R.O.B. malfunction when we shook it?"

"That wasn't my intention," said Daisy. "I just wanted to make sure that he couldn't blast the helicopter."

"Man..." Marut said. "Are we lucky or what?!"

"It seems like we've been getting pretty lucky for a while now," said Bowser.

"Yeah, we've got quite the streak going," said Athelstan. "Actually, no, we don't – we got ourselves captured earlier today. That wasn't lucky. But in general, we've been getting some insane, improbable breaks, if I've ever seen 'em. I mean, what's the likelihood of an attack like *that* one diverging in a way that misses all of us entirely?"

"Maybe we're just getting good luck because we're due for it?" said Marut. "Like, all the bad luck we had when fighting Marissa is getting balanced out now?"

"I don't think that's how things work," said Bowser.

"We're outta here!" Waluigi yelled down from above once the copter came back around. "We've already done way more than we were asked to do!"

"The rest is up to you!" Donkey Kong hollered.

"Crush those MAE morons!" Wario shouted. "Don't drag me back out here again! I've seen what you guys can do!"

"Yeah, that's right!" barked Waluigi. "Never ask us for anything again!"

"We'll try not to," Bowser said, looking away and shaking his head.

Daisy waved at the helicopter as it flew away from the scene. "Thanks! You guys take care!"

Once the transport helicopter containing Wario, Waluigi, Donkey Kong, Diddy Kong, and Petey Piranha soared off in the cloudy, evening gold sky, the Kruna were left by themselves in the bombed,

wrecked, flaming remains of Airebis Emproanakalpolis. Buildings continued to collapse even well after their initial damage. The sector was quickly devolving into an abandoned wasteland.

"Guys, our job here is finished," said Daisy.

"Man – FINALLY," Neva said. "It only took – oh, let's see...ALL DAY. LITERALLY."

"As long as we got it done," said Bowser. "That's the important part."

"The weather should normalize in time now that anything that was in control of it is destroyed," said Athelstan. "If they try to reestablish a control center for weather modifications, it'll take them an extensively long time to accomplish. I mean, I'd expect that it should... But we'll have them beat before they even get to start rebuilding here."

"That's the ideal scenario, by far," said Daisy. "Are we gonna let these fires here die down by themselves?"

"They're tame," said Bowser. "They won't spread. They're diminishing as we speak. Really, if I had any power left, I would've added to them for insurance."

"I think everything here is pretty dead though," said Marut. "Y'all saw the way Waluigi was goin' in, semi-automatic and doubled-up."

"Yeah, the guy's a psycho," said Daisy. "I'm surprised he didn't hit us in the process. If there's nothing more for us to do here, then let's get going."

Ramona nodded. "Return to the cruiser, I guess sleep, and then...are we really going straight to Twilight City?"

"Aw man – please don't tell me we're going there," groaned Neva. "Not so soon. I don't think I can take it. I really don't think I can take it..."

"Me neither," mumbled Marut.

At that moment, Bowser's KY Communicator went off. He took it out

and checked the ID on its display before answering it. Toad's face popped up on the communicator's screen.

"Toad?" Bowser said to his communicator. "You didn't see any of that stuff from earlier with that game show, did you?"

"I sure did!" Toad replied. "Actually, that's why I'm calling! Get over here as soon as you can. Abandon your trip to Twilight City."

"What? Why?" Daisy snapped.

"Because I'm sure you can't afford getting captured again," said Toad. "And I've got an idea on how you can have an easier time trashing those MAE robots. You're gonna need as much edge as you can get going into their most heavily-defensed territories."

Chapter XXVII

Worn Down:

MAE-brand Patrol Bots and other artificial intelligence from MAE continued to treat the Kruna Yura coldly when the six elemental wielders returned from Airebis the next evening. But it would have been one thing if it just stopped there at unfriendliness. A few select MAE robots that the Kruna tried to interact with all replied with the single, lone phrase in a flat, low tone, "MAE will punish you."

The six Kruna Yura headed right for Peach's Castle soon after arriving at Bowser's Palace, for neither Toad nor Alden were in the palace workshop when they made it back into town. Instead, the two blacksmiths were lounging around outside on some chairs set up in the front yard of Peach's Castle. Peach, Toadette, and Toadsworth sat outside with Toad and Alden, iced drinks in their hands and a clear view of the summer sunset in front of them. Everyone in the group waved over and greeted the Kruna when they saw them approaching.

"That was one crazy game show!" hollered Toadette.

"I'm so glad you all got out of there alive," said Peach. "That was terrifying."

"What'd you guys win?" asked Toad.

"A four-hundred-Coin gift card for MAE's online shop," muttered Daisy, shaking her head. "What'd you call us back here for?"

"And what are you sitting out here for?" Neva asked. "That castle's got AC, don't it?"

"It's actually quite pleasant out here right now, considering what it has been like recently," said Peach. "And there's a nice breeze. Tomorrow is when the heat and humidity is going to come back."

"Man, it's *all* hot and humid to me here," said Neva. "Mushroom

Kingdom is one thick, sweaty place. Can't wait for winter to get here."

"Ah, it's not that bad," said Daisy. "You've gotta have an appreciation for all seasons; winter, summer, and everything in between."

"Nope, nothing good about this," grumbled Neva, flexing her arms. "I can already feel the stickiness here."

"So what's this idea about giving us an edge over MAE?" asked Bowser.

"You're gonna like and hate what we have to say," said Toad. "But let's start with what you'll like!"

"That way, we'll leave hating you," said Neva.

"Yup!" Toad replied. "So Toadette and Peach were sitting around watching that game show of death that you guys were on, and they called Alden and I up to let us know. We put it on in our workshop, and guess what? Tha-"

"What?" asked Marut.

Toad frowned. "I was just getting to that. That commander dude, that looked a lot like Midbus when he was all snowy? He gave an answer option to a certain, particular question that Chrissy then gifted us a hint from for a way to have a much easier time handling all those MAE robots and mechs you run into. And that's in those Shine Sprites that they use to power their machinery."

"Now, here's where the bad part of it all comes in," said Alden. "Yes, we now have a better idea of some of MAE's internal hardware, but; well, let's get the obvious out of the way first. Having a water wielder with you would've already made things significantly better because of how easily water can screw with electronics."

"And mixing fire and ice is not the most instantaneous thing," said Toad. "You'll be stuck with flaming ice cubes for a while, as I'm sure you've already figured out yourself. So, not having Warra around already hurts; but Andrew being missing makes that even worse,

because his shadow powers likely could've counteracted those Shine Sprite power cores that MAE uses."

"And that's pretty much the gist of it," said Alden. "So, really, altogether...we found out something that could have helped us, but does us absolutely no good because of the circumstances."

"Please tell me you're actually going somewhere with this," said Bowser.

"We are," said Toad. "This is why we have plan C. Back when you guys had called here and told us what happened on Pi'illo Island and said you were going straight to Christmas Village, Marut mentioned that lightning-magnetism combo technique he and Neva used that junked a lot of those MAE robots. Well, Alden and I started formulating some ideas out of that. But because you were in such a rush, we figured we wouldn't have a chance to flesh those ideas out. *But then,* once you guys got caught and put on that game show, we decided we needed to come up with some way for you to carve through those robots easier ASAP. And this is where those ideas we had come in."

Daisy frowned in impatience. "So are you gonna tell us, or what?"

"It's a surprise," said Alden. "We don't want to spoil anything yet until we've got them working for sure. But just turn in your tools. Bowser's sword, Ramona's sword and shield, Marut's sword and yo-yo, Athelstan's hammer and shield, Daisy's drill staff, Neva's sniper and sickle; we need them all for what we now consider *critical* upgrades."

"Like, don't hand them to us right this second," said Toad. "We're busy, obviously."

"Obviously," said Neva.

"Obviously," replied Alden.

"Just make sure they're dropped off before the night's over so that we can get started on them in the morning," said Toad.

"How long are these upgrades going to take?" asked Bowser.

"Eh, maybe two or three days," said Alden. "Probably three."

"Those are three very crucial days," said Daisy. "You mean you want us to stand idle for three days while MAE gets to scheme and possibly prepare their defenses even more for our next attack? It seems like just one day to us is the equivalent of a week for them. For all we know, they could take control of four other nations in three days. And then what?"

"You might be underestimating just how much damage you've done to them already," said Peach. "I think they're too busy trying to recover from what you've all caused to even consider expanding their territorial boundaries. I mean, you went through Beanbean Kingdom, Delfino Plaza, Sunset Hill, Diamond City, Mount MAE, Pi'illo Island, and Airebis. Really, isn't that just about everywhere but Twilight City and Evershade Valley?"

"Everywhere major for them, at least," said Toadette. "Really, I think you can afford some rest. And you all need it. Even disregarding Airebis, you all look *very* tired."

"I don't remember ever seeing you look so bad, Daisy," said Peach. "Nor you, Bowser."

"You've all done a lot in such a short period of time," said Toadsworth. "You'll burn out and crumble if you do not give yourself some form of a breather."

"Absurd," said Daisy. "Those MAE guys could be setting something into motion at this very second. This could be the end of elemental wielding if we don't do anything about MAE."

"What do you think you've been doing this past week?" said Toadette. "Daisy, give yourself some credit, girl."

"I meant that we have to finish what we've started," said Daisy. "Letting up on MAE could be the thing that does us in!"

"Or going too hard too soon and breaking down because of it," added Toadette.

"Daisy, I don't think I can hold up if we try to force anything,"

mumbled Neva. "My joints are creaking..."

"We're just human, Daisy," said Ramona. "And a koopa. This is all really trying."

"It's not even so much the difficulty of it all," said Bowser. "Marissa and her enemies were notably more difficult. MAE is tough, but their numbers make them incredibly torturous."

"It was one thing when we first started out," said Athelstan. "But with so many of them, they just wore into us so much. We grind away at their numbers, but they grind away at us."

"I'm kinda fresher," said Marut. "But not by a lot. It's hard to keep up against enemies that don't get tired."

"I'm willing to think that the heavier defenses in Airebis aren't the only reason you all got captured," said Toadsworth.

"I'm sorry, but we're Kruna for a reason," said Daisy. "It's not like this is some nine-to-five job; we've got the responsibility of looking after an entire planet!"

"If you don't look after yourself, you won't be able to look after an entire planet!" said Toadette.

"What's with you, Daisy?" asked Peach. "Getting the job done is important to you, sure; but you're usually at least more laid back than this."

"Yeah – just because you're on a mission doesn't mean you have to be all workaholic and super serious," said Toadette.

"You wouldn't be saying that if MAE had this place under control," said Daisy. "These guys are dead serious about what they're trying to do. Literally. We've seen some things from them, alright?"

"We've all seen them," said Neva. "And we're also super tired and blown out, man..."

"Look – I don't know about you guys, but I just want MAE eliminated as soon as possible," said Daisy. "That's the best result for

everybody – for MAE to be gone fast."

"That doesn't mean you have to overextend yourself," said Peach.

Daisy folded her arms and looked away, glowering. "There's too much that we need to do."

"You guys just came back from a game show that was trying to kill you," said Toadette. "Relax, why don't ya! Once Toad gets your tools fixed up, then go and mash some more robots. But for now, just chill..."

"Yeah, but..." Daisy said, her voice trailing off.

"And Warra left on his own accord, remember?" said Bowser. "It's only Andrew who could be in danger right now. Not that he's any less important. We just don't know where he could be."

Daisy sighed. "I had an idea on how we could find Andrew; but after I had thought about it for a while, it wasn't going to do us any good."

Ramona perked up. "What was the idea?"

"You know how it was the Black Mages that programmed your Motomeru in the future, right?" Daisy said. "You know, so that it could pick up on those Crystal Tears, so that it was essentially detecting Peach's DNA? And how we're all in MAE's Universal Database? I wanted us to go ask one of those Patrol Bots where we could find any of the Black Mages, so that we could see if one of them could reprogram your Motomeru, hopefully, maybe with Rosalina's help, like in the future. But then I remembered that even the bots not in MAE-territories have been acting cold towards us."

"So, there goes the idea," said Neva.

"Actually, not really," said Athelstan. "If we ever get a chance where we could get on one of MAE's computers again, we could try hacking into their database to find the Black Mages that way. Their Command Center is likely where the Universal Database itself is. Like, physically, I mean. I'd have to think a database needs some form of hardware to work. So, maybe we could get some kind of direct access to its contents too!"

"That'd mean we would essentially have two objectives in Evershade Valley," said Bowser. "Infiltrate and take over MAE Command Center, and get information on the Black Mages through the Universal Database."

"Or Andrew himself, if it actually has anything on him hidden somewhere," said Athelstan.

Bowser nodded. "Right. But, that day will not be tomorrow. I think we all can agree on that, can we, Daisy?"

Toadsworth spoke to Daisy when she did not respond to Bowser. "This is a *final rush* you're planning on orchestrating through Twilight City and Evershade Valley, correct? Now is the time when you *want* to rest and make sure you're as powerful and healthy as possible. Otherwise, this great push of yours will fail; and you'll be set back a good deal, if not captured or even killed outright."

"I get it," said Daisy. "But, I don't like us waiting..."

Athelstan patted Daisy on the shoulder. "Hey, don't sweat it. I'll help out Toad and Alden with the tools, to speed things up some. The rest of you need to relax and take it easy for a couple days while you can. Especially you, Daisy. It's like in the future, when we had to be selective about where and when we were going under Marissa's Nirvana Barrier."

"Like how I'm gonna be selective in saying that I'm going right for the shower," said Neva, walking towards the castle doors.

"You mean you're actually going to take a shower?" asked Athelstan.

"I'm covered in grime and grit – of course I'm not taking that into my bed!" Neva snapped.

Ramona went into the castle with Neva, leaving the others outside in the castle front yard. While Athelstan and Marut got a couple of chairs and brought them over to the group, Daisy stared up at the golden early evening sky. Her hands on her hips, she tapped her feet and gently swayed her weight back and forth on each leg.

"I'm heading back to my palace for a little while," Bowser said to Daisy. "If I don't see you again tonight, I will later."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, see ya later..." Daisy replied.

Bowser crossed his arms, somewhat annoyed. "Oh, come on. It's not like we'll be sitting around and waiting until Christmas. If you've got ants in your pants so bad, why not try figuring out that Alkemei Vranzer? That ought to keep your mind occupied during the break...since you haven't done a single thing with it yet."

"I've been trying, damn it," Daisy said as Bowser walked away. "It hasn't been doing a thing!" She peered down at the base of her neck and clutched the Vranzer's gem and brace. "Why haven't you been doing anything?..."

Even while everyone else ate dinner inside of Peach's Castle a little later on, Daisy stood outside in the front yard. Leaning up on one of the castle's exterior walls, Daisy stared skyward and watched stars twinkle. She had been mulling over her situation with the Vranzer ever since Bowser had brought it up.

I can't consciously activate this like I can with the Orianthi, Daisy said in thought. *I can't tell if it's activating automatically, because I can't ever notice anything happening. What's even supposed to happen? Pendant of Fate, fate-altering properties, the Master Blacksmiths didn't even know if it works – what does this all mean? Did I waste eight months just for a dud?*

Daisy grimaced. *I can't get anyone's help with this... Rosalina's busy with Mario and Luigi doing...who knows. I wasn't around when she recruited them. Geno's gone...Terran's been gone... Arka Knight, where are you? You said you had done all you needed to do in the future; but what about now? You told me to go get this, but I don't know how to use this. This was your idea. How is this supposed to help in any way, when it hasn't even done anything?!*

A peculiar and disconcerting string of thoughts then crossed Daisy's mind. *Do we have to get Osiris unsealed so we can seal him in this?*

What would happen if I break it? Is there something also bound to this? Does this thing hold some sort of sentience too, like the Ankh?

Sighing, Daisy cupped her elbows in her hands and started tapping one of her feet on the ground. Her gaze dropped from above to straight ahead at the Toad Town community lighting up around her. It seemed as though no matter what she thought, she was not getting anywhere with figuring out what to do with the Vranzer.

What if I'm not meant to use it? Daisy wondered. *Maybe I just can't activate it no matter what I do... Maybe my mission was just to retrieve it...for somebody else...*

Daisy hung out with Ramona that night in the room Peach had let the light wielder stay in. By the time Ramona had gotten under her covers, the clock came close to eleven. Only after Ramona had fallen asleep did Daisy intend to get up from her chair and leave, but not before asking her a question.

"Let's go out somewhere tomorrow," said Daisy. "Just you and me. You wanna do that?"

"Oh, uh, sure," Ramona replied with a smile. "What did you want to do?"

"Nothing intense or draining," said Daisy. "Maybe you could help me relax a bit. I gotta admit, I've been feeling pretty wound up from fighting MAE. I'm counting on you to take my mind off of things for a little while. We can go around Toad Town some. There's more than enough to do here."

"Just us two?" Ramona asked. "No one else?"

"Yeah. At least, to start with. That okay with you?"

"Yes. That's more than fine."

"Cool."

Daisy stayed with Ramona for a little while longer, the Kruna of

Light's gaze getting hazier by the minute. Though Ramona was coming close to dozing off, Daisy did not move from her seat.

"You can go, Daisy," Ramona mumbled. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" Daisy asked.

"I'm sure," Ramona replied. "I promise. I'm too tired to do anything other than just fall asleep."

Daisy then felt comfortable with leaving the room. After turning off the lights in the room and opening the door out, Daisy said, "See ya tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," murmured Ramona, closing her eyes. "Here's hoping I don't sleep for forty hours and that I can get out of bed in the morning... And thanks, for being a great friend."

"You're more than welcome," said Daisy. She stepped out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaving Ramona to sleep in peace. Almost Immediately upon entering the hallways of Peach's Castle, Daisy's mind went back to the Alkemei she wore.

Why not try figuring out that Alkemei Vranzer? Bowser's voice echoed in Daisy's head.

Chapter XXVIII

The Original Shadow Shifter:

Daisy and Ramona walked into Toad Town's Milk Bar the next afternoon, one of hundreds of shops spread out across the world under the Milk Bar franchise's ownership. Even though the interior had changed and took on a modernized, futuristic look like much of Mushroom Kingdom had, its marketing and menu had more or less stayed the same. From all sorts of milks and milk variations, to various assortments of milk-based products like special shakes and ice cream, to fully fleshed-out meals, just about anyone could walk into the Milk Bar and find what they were looking for.

"Pick out whatever you want," Daisy said to Ramona as they got in line. "I'm buying."

"Huh? Really?" Ramona asked.

"Yup!" Daisy replied. "Just tell me what you want."

"Are you sure?" Ramona said. "I've got enough money. I can handle myself-"

"What did I just get through saying?"

"I know what you said, but, why?"

"Because I want to, and that's that. Now pick something. Whatever you want. Just don't clean out the whole store."

Ramona gulped and nodded. "Um...okay..."

Daisy scooted closer to Ramona and bumped an elbow into her. "Hey, you can chill, you know. You don't have to worry about anything. It's not like ya did anything wrong. I just wanna hang out with you, and I wanna buy you lunch. Or, a snack is fine if you're not really hungry."

"Are you...are you just trying to make me feel better...about all of this?"

"No. Well, yes, but no. You're my friend, and I want to spend what little and rather inconvenient free time we now have with a friend. And that's you, if it isn't already clear."

Ramona smiled a little after a few moments, her demeanor relaxing. Daisy and her did not have to wait long to get to the counter, for only one group of people and a koopa by himself stood in front of them in the line. When they got to the counter, a toad waited on the other side for their order.

"Alright! What can I do for you two kids?" the cashier said.

"I'll take one of those Builder Protein Shakes," said Daisy. "That's a fifty gram-count on the protein, right?"

"Yeah, fifty-four," the cashier replied.

"Even better," said Daisy. "Every bit of recovery aid helps. I'll take two of those. Both in strawberry."

"Man, that's over a hundred grams of protein!" the cashier exclaimed. "Did you just come back from a soccer tournament or some super long bicycle race?!"

"Not this time," Daisy said. "Can't actually get into the details at the moment. Ramona, do you know what you want?"

"Uh, maybe one of those shakes you're getting would be a good idea," said Ramona. "Can I get ice cream too?"

"Sure, if that's what you want," said Daisy.

"In, like, a large bowl?" Ramona asked.

"Go ahead," Daisy said. "What flavor?"

"Oh, uh," Ramona murmured, scanning the display case filled with ice cream buckets. "Gosh, there's so many..."

"What's catching your eye?" asked Daisy. "They got a lot of good ones here, huh? Mint chocolate chip, cookies 'n' cream, butter pecan, peanut butter chocolate swirl-"

"Actually, chocolate is fine," said Ramona. "Chocolate and lemon. No, there's blueberry?! Chocolate and blueberry!"

"You have to pick one or the other," said the cashier. "Pick the best one out of the two."

"Why does it have to be one or the other?" asked Ramona. "I like both. I can't choose one or the other. Why can't I just have both?"

"Oh," said the cashier. "I mean...you *can* have both, if you really want to. We don't normally sell combination flavors. We don't mix ice cream flavors here except for that special vanilla-chocolate-strawberry mix I can't pronounce. This is to make sure we minimize the chance of accidental transfer between buckets. Our bowls are made more vertical than horizontal so that people can have an easier time drinking melted ice cream out of them, which will happen to a fairly large degree on days like today."

"Aw man," Ramona mumbled. "I don't know which one; I can't help it if I like both. If I *really* had to pick, I think I like chocolate more; but blueberry is so rare..."

"I'll pay extra if she gets to mix the two," said Daisy.

"What – no, don't do that," said Ramona. "It's just ice cream."

"If you want both, then you'll get both," replied Daisy. "I say you either get what you want from a store, or you don't get anything."

"No, no, you don't really have to pay extra, technically," said the cashier. "I tell ya what – what you can do is order two separate bowls, one for chocolate and one for blueberry. Pay the price for two mediums, then she can have both or mix however much she wants."

Ramona's face brightened. "Let's do that! Is that okay, Daisy?"

"Of course," Daisy replied. The twinkling sparkle she noticed in Ramona's eyes broadened her own smile.

Daisy and Ramona took their orders on a tray to a two-person booth by the windows. While Ramona slouched some when she sat, Daisy let herself lean up against the window at an angle and propped one of her legs up along her seat. Upon noticing the way Daisy sat, Ramona giggled.

"What?" Daisy asked with a light chuckle.

"Oh, it's just, well, everybody else in here is sitting upright," Ramona replied. "You're reminding me a lot of Andrew. He would do what you're doing a lot."

"But I'm older than him, so this is my thing," Daisy said, drinking one of her shakes.

"Actually, I just thought of something else," Ramona said. "Sometimes when he drank something cold, he would open his mouth and act like he's puffing out smoke."

"Ha! Why?"

"I don't know. It's just one of those things we all just...do, I guess."

"You mean like how you play with your fingers when you're nervous?"

Ramona gasped. "How'd you figure that out?"

Daisy shrugged. "Because you're doing it right now. And your voice is kinda shaky."

"Oh, uh, sorry. I just..."

"Don't apologize. What are you still nervous about?"

Ramona sighed. "Everything...all of this that we're going through...a part of me can't really grasp that I'm actually sitting here across from you, in this city, in this part of the world, in this time. And me, myself...this equipment, this adult body, my scars, my age, that Andrew's not here anymore... It's... Sometimes, I lie awake at night wondering if this is all real."

Daisy stared at Ramona with rapidly blinking wide eyes. "What do you mean? You think you're dreaming?"

"I don't know," said Ramona. Though she now looked like she was relaxing, her gaze seemed hazy and unfocused. "I keep thinking I'll just wake up one day and...this all won't be a thing. I'll be back home, and I won't be in this body, and I won't have scars...and I'll be back in school. Because that's where I had been for so long. School. Christmas Village. It's weird. Too weird for me to be here where I am right now."

"But you *are* here," said Daisy. "There shouldn't be anything weird about that. You have control over yourself, you're breathing, you're interacting, you're making conscious decisions – you're definitely here."

Ramona fiddled with her ice cream, her expression turning blank. "I wish I wasn't. I never wanted to be here. I just wanted to stay home. I could've stayed home from the start, if not for Andrew. He was the adventurous one; so when we had those elemental nightmares and got guidance from Rosalina, he was ready to go within the hour. I couldn't tell him otherwise. He always did things his way. If he didn't like how somebody was doing things, or if he wanted to do things differently, or wanted to do something different altogether, that's what he would do. A lot of the time, I had no problem with that. I generally liked his take on things. Other times, I wasn't much of a fan of his ideas. I wasn't much of a fan of that elemental shrine mission that our dreams were forcing us into, but I let him talk me into it. He was going to leave without me, but I didn't want him to go alone. And now...I guess we're here."

"How long have you been feeling like this?" Daisy murmured.

"Ever since the night we got sent into the future, I've just wanted him and I to go home. I want life to go back to the way it was. Really, I just...I miss being a kid. I grew up too fast; none of this feels right."

"Ramona, you're twenty," said Daisy. "How can you want to be a kid again already?"

"Why not?" said Ramona. "Everything was so much clearer back

then. Everything was so much brighter and fresher. It wasn't perfect at all, and a fair amount of things quite frankly sucked, but...I still miss it. Even now, at this very moment, I can see it all in my head. My second grade classroom for my first year in Christmas Village, the weekend anime, all those snow days with hot chocolate, running those pacer tests in middle school, the bus rides home, those long summer days, the summer thunderstorms, going to our dads' rec baseball games, the video games we would play; I could go on, really..."

Daisy nodded. "You really liked your childhood that much..."

"Yeah!" Ramona replied. "We used to have a bunch of other people we would play with a lot...before they left, anyways. Every one of our friends at some point or another grew distant or just flat out left, especially after high school. So really, it was just Andrew and I. We'd hang out almost every day. My dad would pretty much expect Andrew to come by after school every day. Whenever he got home from work and didn't see Andrew, he'd think something was wrong with him. Because of how dumb Andrew's dad became over the years, mine almost acted like a dad to Andrew. Every once in a while, Dad would let him sleep over. He even took us out on a hunting trip with those special compound bows...even though Andrew and I didn't want to shoot any animals. And we also went to the driving range for golf a few times, but Andrew and I had to share clubs. And we both were pretty bad too."

"Oh, you couldn't have been that bad," said Daisy. "Golf's not that hard."

"Well, I could hit the ball straight most of the time, but I couldn't get it very far without losing accuracy," Ramona said. "Andrew hit really far with a lot of curve, when he didn't shank it. We were much better at football and soccer. In high school, we'd always have either a soccer ball or a football in our locker to play with during the lunch hour."

"You shared a locker?"

"Yeah. Because when we got assigned lockers in our freshman year, mine was all the way up on the third floor, but my seventh

period was on the first floor and on the other side of school. His locker was much closer; and since we walked to and from school once we started high school, he just let me use his. It just ended up staying that way, really. Each year we got a new locker, we just stuck to using whichever one of the two was better for us. Our senior year one was perfect, because it was on the second floor and right next to one of those huge stairwells with the windows all around the stairs, and that was, like, the hangout spot in the morning before the first class started. Man, I really miss all those people we used to be friends with. I mean, I'm upset with them all for not sticking around and only being friends when in school, but it was still fun having them all there..."

"Any *real* friends would've definitely stuck around," said Daisy. "Aside from fake people like them, that all sounds way cooler than anything I did as a kid, for sure."

"But you were a princess though, right?" said Ramona. "Even if your parents were, well...poor at parenting, there had to have been some upside to being a princess."

"Hmm – uh, no," Daisy said, drawing a laugh from Ramona. "Nobody in Sarasaland even liked that I was one; especially not theirs, thanks to how scapegoating works. Or, inheritance of blame, maybe. Eh, I never really wanted to be a princess anyways. Too boring. Way too boring. All I wanted to do was be outside and have some fun, you know? Burn off all this extra energy I've had for as long as I can remember. Aside from your moms being gone and Shady's dad evolving into an idiot, you guys had it pretty good, to me. I don't need to be a part of anything overcomplicated. Politics are stupid. I would've loved to be there in Christmas Village with you guys. Us three would've been a super rad trio!"

Ramona grinned. "You think so?"

"Of course! We wouldn't have even needed any of those phony friends. Having two really great and totally awesome friends beats a bunch of phonies a hundred times out of a hundred."

"It really does. Now I know how much we mattered to everybody else in the end, but...back then, in that time...even if people did

always leave, and weren't the most genuine..."

Daisy waited for Ramona to finish what she was saying, but Ramona never did. The Kruna of Light let her voice trail off and the thought fade into nonexistence. It was around that time when Daisy picked up on a substantial energy signature somewhere nearby; but she was more concerned with Ramona, who did not appear to even pay attention to it. Listless, Ramona resumed consuming her ice cream and shake without saying anything more.

"Hey, what other sports did you guys like?" Daisy asked.

"We did sorta like tennis," said Ramona. "I remember when we played in gym class in middle school, I was one of the better kids at it. Andrew was okay, but he always hit too hard. He could never control that. But, man, that serve of his was nasty. It was like a curving rocket, and it sank so quick. Whenever I didn't play him, I could keep a rally going for a long while. I feel like we probably could've really picked it up and been great at it, but we just never did. Baseball was nice, but given how Christmas Village is...well, you've seen it. It's not really tundra, but it's, like, mountain-subarctic with a decent amount of trees. But anyways, baseball isn't popular there; because that's more of a warm-weather sport. Basketball isn't popular there either. Unless it's indoors. But given how used to the cold people are up there, they can really play anything they want."

"Oh yeah, I totally get what you mean," said Daisy. "It's just the nature of the sports themselves. It's pretty much like saying you can't play hockey in the summer, unless you're either inside or playing field and not ice."

"Yeah, exactly that."

"You like volleyball?"

"No. I mean, I can't say. I haven't really tried it but a few times, and I wasn't good at all. Same thing with basketball."

Daisy grinned. "Some time after we get this whole thing with MAE sorted out, we're playing volleyball. Volleyball and basketball both."

Ramona giggled. "Gosh, you're really a sporty girl, aren't you? Is there anything you don't play?"

"Not really. That's just something I do. A lotta sports...because sports and earth wielding is about all I know how to do good. And driving. Well, mostly just riding bikes. Motorbikes and cycling both."

"So that's what you'd be doing if we weren't Kruna?"

"Oh yeah. That's what I was doing before too. I've won plenty of tournaments! Some really crazy ones, at that!"

Daisy and Ramona both enjoyed talking about sports as they ate and drank, but a startling surprise brought their discussion to an abrupt end just after they emptied their cups and bowls. Ramona's eyes flared open as wide as they could go, her expression turning utterly spooked. In her sight, she saw a pale, black-haired girl with a hime cut walk past their booth. The girl's dated, Gothic-reminiscent getup of a black cropped jacket and white shirt and skirt over striped black and purple leggings and vintage black shoes made her stand out among the modern crowd. A full paper bag in her hands, the pleasant, dark girl walked by without paying Daisy nor Ramona any attention. From what Daisy could tell, Ramona seemed to recognize the girl.

"K-Kur-Kuroneko!" Ramona shrieked.

The dark girl's sizable eyes locked onto the person who had called out her name. A few seconds after looking at Ramona, the girl's happy expression turned just as shocked as hers. After getting a good but short look at Ramona however, the girl rushed out of the store and down the street. Ramona stayed terrified even after the girl left.

"Kuroneko?" said Daisy. "Who was that? Do you know her?"

"What is she doing here?!" Ramona cried. "Does she live here now? Is this where she has been?!"

"I've never seen her around here before in my life," said Daisy. "I mean, I could say that about a lot of people I don't pay attention to;

but I know for a fact I haven't seen anyone looking like her around here before. In fact, she seems representative of the opposite of what's been going on with all this technology and modernization from MAE."

What Daisy had said calmed Ramona down some, but the Kruna of Light still remained highly startled. "No, no, no, not her..." Ramona mumbled. "No, no, no..."

"What's the deal with her? She didn't seem too special to me. Though, she did have some kind of smoothness about her...kind of suave. Wait, that's a word for guys isn't it- and whoa! Did you feel that big wall of energy just leave?! That was coming from her, wasn't it?"

"I...I think so."

"Alright, awesome – I thought that was Kokoro for a second. I mean, her signature was big enough, but it didn't feel anything like his. If you know her, let me in on who she is too! Maybe we should go get her and see if she can help us out!"

"NO! No! No..."

"Huh?"

"It's...it's complicated..."

"Why? What's she all about? Come on, tell me-"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"Why not? I'm-"

"I don't...want...to talk about it."

"But you're obviously distressed over it. If something's bothering you, I want to know."

Ramona took a deep breath and smiled. "It's fine. I'm just kind of surprised that I saw someone that I haven't seen in quite a while... Kuroneko Hana... She used to be a friend back in high school. Me

and Andrew's best friend... Ironically enough, we did have a little bit of a trio thing going on for a little while...but..."

"What happened?" asked Daisy. "Why'd it end? If you guys were such good friends, then-"

"Like I said, I don't want to talk about it," replied Ramona. "Now, never mind it. I'm fine. I'm good."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am," Ramona said, nodding with a deep breath. "Already over it."

Not two seconds later, a bipedal white dog in a black polo shirt and basic blue jeans with casual red sneakers and a bright pink hat walked up to Daisy and Ramona's booth. Standing at about the same height as Mario, the dog had a relaxed expression with a perpetually persistent smile. His presence grabbed both Daisy's and Ramona's attention.

"Heya," said the dog. "Would it be rude if I interrupted your date?"

"Our wh-, our what?" asked Ramona.

"It's not a date," Daisy said to the dog.

"Are you sure it isn't?" said the dog, his expression turning cheeky. "Your friend here looked pretty spooked out a few moments ago. Could've fooled me."

"Oh, she'll be fine," said Daisy. "What's up?"

"I recognized you guys from across the restaurant," said the dog, going back to grinning. It was as if his smile was cemented to his face. "But I had to make sure you just weren't some cosplayer posers. Turns out, you're both just ugly in real life."

"Oh, and screw you too," Daisy coldly shot back.

"Hey, hey, I'm kidding," said the dog. "I'm sure you get lots of stares from, uh, plenty of male humans. Anyways, my name is Rover. But

my full name is Prince Maximilian Roverton Skyrunner the Fifth of Some Petalburg Suburb. But you can just call me Max. Max the Dog. It's short for Maximum Dog."

"Wait, so are you a prince, or nah?" asked Daisy.

"I could be," said Max. "Or, I could be a well-placed vessel of fate meant to distract you from something important. Hmm... Maybe this should be a lesson to you. A lesson that things are not always as they seem. Maybe if a talking dog walks up to you and says he's a prince, you shouldn't take it at face value."

"Well, either way, it's nice to meet you, Max," said Ramona.

Max looked away. "Oh, so formal. I didn't know what I was getting into. I don't even have the right socks on for this. I'm wearing two left socks!"

"You can tell which sock goes on which foot?" asked Ramona.

Max winked. "Hell if I know. No one ever says anything about it on the packaging. Hey, I got a joke for ya, if you wanna hear it."

"Uh...sure?" said Daisy, exchanging a look with Ramona.

A brief instant passed before Max said something. "Too late. I already forgot it."

"How?" asked Daisy.

"Ya probably shouldn't have hesitated on your answer," said Max. "Burnt too much time. It's truly a tragedy that you hesitated. It was a really good joke. But now it's gone. Life will never be the same. All because I forgot the punchline." He glanced back at the registers. "Now it's just a line. With no punch. Shouldn't expect punch in a Milk Bar anyways."

"Alright, so you know who we are?" said Daisy. "Did you need our help?"

"Nah," said Max. "I wanted to meet you when I saw that you were here. That video game you've got coming out next year looks really

promising. I've never played anything like it before."

"Video game?" said Daisy.

"Yeah," said Max. "The one Wario Ware's developing. It's some sort of a squad-based action RPG with puzzles and platforming. I'm surprised you didn't know about it. One of your guys is overseeing the project. It's still in its early stages, but that short one-level demo they put out was enough to get me hooked. You guys must be pretty powerful wielders. Especially that air wielder. All of his moves are ridiculously broken."

"He's ridiculous, that's for sure," said Daisy.

"He's easily the best character in the game," said Max. "I hope they take their time in making it and don't rush to meet a deadline. Nobody would like you guys after a glitchy, rushed game *and* controversial news surrounding you."

"I guess you know what we've been doing lately, huh?" said Ramona.

"Not really," said Max. "I've just been hearing that you've been causing MAE a lotta trouble. I didn't pay attention to the details. The news is so biased nowadays, you can't just absorb whatever they say. I only noticed that the MAE-sourced news is making you all look a lot worse than non-MAE news is. And I'm not a wielder, but I think you guys seem to be reliable. If Mario and Luigi are such great heroes, then you wielders can't be all that bad. So you don't gotta worry about me calling for your heads, at least. Not when I still have to confess my deepest, truest, innermost, fiery, passionate, absolute secret feelings for you!"

"What?" said Daisy. "You can't be serious. You just met us."

"Yeah," said Max.

Daisy threw her hands up. "Okay. What feelings ya got?"

"I think you're cool," said Max. "Done."

"Wow, I am shocked," said Daisy.

"I know," said Max. "I'm so embarrassed. I've never confessed to anyone before."

Ramona let her face fall on the table in laughter. "What is going on right now?"

"I'm just trying to get you guys to laugh," said Max. "You two were looking so tense and worried, so I figured you needed to loosen up some. But, man, it took ya long enough. For a while, I felt like I was failing my first night on stage all over again."

Daisy let out a few giggles. "Sorry. I guess we just weren't ready for you."

"I get it," said Max. "Fighting MAE must be weighing hard on ya. Nothing pleasant about punching metal, or getting shocked with tasers, or getting forced onto a game show. By the way, I just remembered the joke."

"Oh, neat," said Ramona. "What was it?"

"It sucks," said Max. "So I'm not gonna say it."

"Didn't you just say it was really good?" asked Ramona.

"Yeah," said Max. "It was funnier in my head. But to be serious, I feel like I need to tell you guys a little something. I've got a buddy who works for MAE over in Twilight City. She transferred there last month on assignment and won't be back until the end of summer. Apparently, they needed more builders and technicians centered there for whatever reason. Probably needed extra hands and heads for new creations. The pay's amazing, honestly. But whenever I hear from her, she always seems to talk about this one guy who likes acting like he's the smartest guy on the entire planet. Now, granted, I wouldn't scoff at anyone who said he was behind a lot of MAE's works; but she consistently mentions him being very egotistical and vain. And that's when he's not making angry demands and handing out cranky orders. But really – if it weren't for him being in the position he's in, he'd be a total pushover. All he has going for him is his brain and narcissism. Angry narcissism. Like, to the point of being mentally unstable. I guess if you're smart enough to create

artificial intelligence and orchestrate the manufacturing of droves upon droves of machines, you'll inevitably start thinking that you're leagues above everyone else on the planet. To MAE's credit, dealing with him is still better than being a part of a sweatshop chain."

"Who could that be?" Ramona asked Daisy. "If it's not Chrissy, then..."

"I'll have to see if I can get a name for ya," said Max. "That is, if I ever see you again. Or, if you're heading into that area soon, maybe you'll figure it out for yourself. I just ask that if you ever come across an *orange yoshi who likes wearing black and pink ribbons,* you kinda just leave her out of all the fighting. A fair amount of the workers for MAE – including the ones in her discipline – they don't share the same hatred for elemental wielding that those higher up in rank do. Maybe that's why they're not higher in rank. They're just doing their jobs and doing what those in charge tell them to. I have a strong feeling that if and when MAE's true intentions get out and become publicly acknowledged, and when they're exposed for acting out of hate rather than for the greater good, a healthy chunk of their workforce may just end up quitting."

"We'll do our best to keep a lookout for her so we don't hurt her," said Daisy.

"Thanks, pal," said Max. "There's a lot of people counting on ya, even if they don't know it yet. Welp. I've said what I needed to tell ya. I better get a move on and leave you two to your romantic afternoon."

Daisy scowled. "We're not on a date."

"Okay," said Max, winking and pulling out his phone. "Before I go though, I need you to address this customer satisfaction questionnaire. What was your level of satisfaction with me? Did I successfully derail you? Has this been a memorable encounter? How often do random strangers attempt to strike up conversation with you? Will you remember my full name? Please complete this survey so that I may better annoy you in the future."

Daisy took Max's phone, but there was no special form on its screen to fill out. Instead, the phone displayed an animated picture of dancing Goombas. One of the Goombas had a photoshopped face with an exaggerated, excessively-broad grin. Strangely, the Goomba's grin did not seem that far off from Max's smile.

"I'm feeling something," said Daisy. "I don't know if it's annoyance, but it's definitely...something..."

Max turned and started to walk away. "Noted. Alright, this was fun. I'm outta here, dorks. Enjoy your date, and whatever comes after it."

"Okay – *now* I'm actually annoyed," said Daisy. She and Ramona watched Max return to his table, get his drink, and head for the doors out of the Milk Bar.

"He did have a little bit of insider information though," said Ramona. "I wonder who in MAE he was talking about."

"It has to be one of the other MAE Learners, if it's not Chrissy," said Daisy. "But who's left?"

Chapter XXIX

Can You Do It?:

Strolling down a street in Toad Town, Daisy and Ramona departed from the local Milk Bar and did their best to stay under the shade of the buildings. A few citizens throughout town even had parasols with them for protection against the high heat of the day. As has been the case as of late, the Patrol Bots Daisy and Ramona went past did not interact with them. The friendly and strangely organic spirited nature the Patrol Bots had towards Daisy her first day back in Mushroom Kingdom no longer existed, not for her or the other Kruna Yura. If not for the MAE-made products outside of MAE territories not being under MAE jurisdiction, any and all of them would have attacked the Kruna.

"I'll be glad when all this MAE stuff is gone," said Daisy. "In ways, these robots are being even colder than Neva."

Ramona laughed. "Neva's cold alright. Icy cold."

"Wha- OH!" Daisy exclaimed. "You know what I meant!"

"If there's one thing that's not cold, it's the temperature out here," said Ramona. "I'm really starting to think we should've drove. At least we would have had air conditioning."

"Hey, do you think they'll be hypersensitive to us if we do something wrong? I feel like maybe we should try to test them and see what they do."

"Test those bots? You mean, like, actually break a law?"

"Yeah. I'm curious."

"Well I don- I don't – I-I, I- wha-no, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Something minor... Like, we could jaywalk? Or litter?"

"No, don't try it. There'll...if they react, then that'll essentially render Mushroom Kingdom unsafe for us, wouldn't it?"

"Oh. Yeah. You're right. But still..."

"No, Daisy, that's too risky."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

Ramona stayed quiet for several steps, speaking up again once they started crossing a street. "Hey, Daisy? Do you...do you think I'm boring?"

"What?" Daisy said.

"Like, are you bored with me?" Ramona asked. "I hope I'm not boring. I mean, I'm not very exciting or energetic like you are, so..."

Daisy nudged Ramona in the arm with an elbow. "You're fine. Where'd that even come from? I haven't felt bored once all day."

"I'm just...I don't know...I'm not very happy at all..."

"I know, Ramona. But you're doing better than you have been, right? And Andrew'll be back soon. We'll find him."

Ramona paused, sighing and becoming weak in the face. "Daisy, I have a secret... It's a wish of mine that I'm kind of ashamed of."

"I'm sure it's not as bad as you think," Daisy replied.

"You judge for yourself. But...I wish I could go back in time...or reverse time...and relive my childhood again, all the way up until the day after I graduated from high school. And then, I want to loop back around and run through the whole cycle again. I don't really even care if I get to change anything. I just want to keep running through that stretch of time over and over. It makes it hard for me to be passionate or energetic about anything happening now, because...transitioning away from that has been excruciating. Hard as it is to explain, that's what I want. So, really, I've been unhappy with how everything has turned out. I've felt so overwhelmed with everything that has gone on. Things aren't as simple as they were

back then. Nothing's what it used to be. I've been wanting to try and keep everything as close to the way it used to be, but none of it has worked out..."

"I understand what you're saying, but we don't know how the future's going to turn out. So, for all we know, you could have something better ahead of you in the future."

"But it'll never be the way it was. It'll never be what I once knew, what I was familiar with, what I was comfortable with; none of it will..."

"But, again, you don't know what things will be like a year from now, or five years from now, or a month, or next week, or even tomorrow."

Ramona frowned. "You're right. I don't know what things will be like, but I do know how easily and how badly things can get ruined. We both know, because we were there, in the future, Marissa's future. There's so many ways things can go wrong – really wrong – and we can't tell how. I don't know what to expect. I'm...I don't like any of this."

Things got silent between the two of them for an extended period of time. Daisy had no idea what to say, and Ramona had nothing more to say. Both felt the good-natured vibe of the day turn heavy and grim as they continued walking.

"You don't have to come up with any answer," Ramona eventually said. "I don't think there's any good one other than what I already know; the past is the past and will never be the present ever again. But as we drift further and further away from the past, I miss it that much more. One of the stories I've been working on in my free time is essentially just me turning my past into a fictionalized narrative. It's a cheap way of trying to do what can't actually be done, but..." Her voice trailed off into a sigh, and no end came to the sentence.

"Whenever you get around to finishing that book, I want a copy," said Daisy. "But I better get a friend discount on it!"

Despite her lingering melancholy, Ramona smiled. "That's if I ever

get to finish it. I've gotten too busy reminiscing instead of just writing it all down."

"I guess that makes two of us..."

"Huh? You write?"

Daisy stifled a laugh. "What? No way – I mean, we're both stalling on things."

"Oh," Ramona said. "What are you stuck on?"

Daisy and Ramona sat on a bench under the shade of one of the several gazebos held in a Toad Town park. With a view of many people and their kids spread out among the playgrounds, basketball courts, and tennis courts, Daisy explained to Ramona all the trouble she had in trying to uncover and activate the Alkemei Vranzer's unknown power.

"It hasn't activated once in the time we've been fighting MAE," said Daisy. "Nothing I've done has worked. I'm spinning my wheels here. I need to figure this thing out, but I can't. I'm stuck. I don't know if it's a dud, or if it's just me."

"It can't be you, Daisy," Ramona said. "You're amazing! You do things I can't even begin to imagine doing myself! Ever since I met you in the Ice Shrine, you've always surprised me! Even then, when I first met you! You were in Nova Form! Before that, I had never seen that from anyone! I had only heard about it in history classes and online encyclopedias! And I don't even think that there are still even any elemental wielding classes in school anymore! Not public school, anyways. Wielding has been falling out of favor a bit for some time now, and I can only imagine past wielders generally being more powerful than today's wielders. You achieved Nova Form during a time period where elemental wielding has been on a steady decline. That's just *one* thing you've done. I could go down a whole list; but to summarize it, we wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you. You can figure out how to work the Vranzer!"

Daisy readjusted the Vranzer's brace around her neck and fiddled with its gem. "But what if I actually can't? What if this is something I just can't do, or something I'm not meant to do? I mean...I can't do everything..."

"Then we just have to live with the constant threat of Osiris being released," said Ramona. "We could just take the Master Pendant from Kokoro and keep it locked up somewhere."

"Arka Knight said that this would eradicate the threat," Daisy replied. "I didn't go on an eight-month trip to find what could be the most powerful Alkemei ever made just to push our problems on to some generation further down the line. Osiris is currently bound to an imperfect Elemental Seal that won't last. Eventually, that seal will weaken at some point in the distant future, and Osiris will break free on his own. And once that happens, he'll in all likelihood go right for the Shadow Queen to free her. Then try to guess what happens."

Daisy gestured at all the people playing in the park and enjoying the day as she continued. "All our work done here in our lifetime will be for nothing. We have the opportunity to end things before things end. We better do something about it. We may be the only capable people. There may not be another chance after us."

"But if you can't figure out how to use the Vranzer – or if the Vranzer even works – then how can we do anything about it?" Ramona asked.

Her expression turning beyond serious but remaining soft, Daisy gave Ramona a lengthy, focused stare into her eyes. Ramona returned Daisy's gaze, waiting for her to say something. The longer Daisy stared, the more uncomfortable and red-faced Ramona got.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Ramona finally asked.

"If you haven't figured it out already, I've been thinking about you," said Daisy.

"Hu-huh?!" Ramona mumbled. "Uh...uh...wow...I'm...really?"

Daisy nodded. "If I can't use the Vranzer, I feel like you need to give

it a go."

Ramona's eyes widened for a split second before she relaxed. "Oh, that's what you... Um...why me?"

"It'd be either you or Peach. I'm going off of what happened in the future. I believe that Peach's status as our generation's Oracle of Fates still holds merit here; but she's not a very good elemental wielder at all in this time. That could have an impact on her ability to even activate any Alkemei. But you, on the other hand..."

Ramona felt stunned as Daisy undid the Vranzer and grabbed her hands. As black left the Vranzer's gem with its removal from Daisy's elemental energy, Daisy placed the great Alkemei in Ramona's grasp and cupped her hands over hers. Daisy's hold on Ramona's hands tightened, but in a firm way that still felt tender.

"I know this has to be a lot to ask of you," murmured Daisy. "If it's too much, then that's okay. I understand. I'm only asking this of you because I can't do it myself."

"I...but why me?" Ramona asked.

"Why not you. You're the most powerful one out of any of us."

"What? I'm not! I swear to you, I'm not. You are, Daisy; you have Nova Form! You have Full Power Nova Form! I'm...I'm really not up to par with where I was in the future. I've only gotten weaker since then. I wasn't even on your level *when we were there* ! And even as a kid, Andrew was always more powerful than me. Always. I'm not that strong, Daisy..."

"Ramona, listen to me... You're more powerful than you're aware. Maybe not on a day-to-day basis, but...since you brought Andrew and the future up, you remember when we were on Mekarsari and you thought that Andrew had got killed? You went on that rampage and tore through at least a thousand guards, and you scared all of us in the process. You didn't even slow down or look tired until you regained control of yourself."

Ramona's eyes started watering as she began to quiver. "I've been

trying to forget I did that-"

Daisy's hold on Ramona's hands tightened more. "Don't cry. Please, don't cry. It's okay. It's over, it's done. None of us hold it against you. But...it's proof of what you're really capable of."

"It scares me..."

"Please, don't be scared of it. It's a gift... It could be just what we needed. The Vranzer might just only respond to someone who has a high enough amount of power. I may not be powerful enough. I feel that...my role in this might have just been to go get the Vranzer and keep it safe for someone more powerful to use it."

"Daisy, I-"

"You're more powerful than me, Ramona. You're the most powerful Kruna on the team. Maybe the Vranzer will respond to you. If it doesn't, it doesn't. But at least try."

Ramona gulped, ultimately deciding to give it a shot. She swapped out her Alkemei Motomeru for the Vranzer, the Motomeru's gem going blank and the Vranzer's gem turning golden. As with Daisy, the Vranzer did not reject Ramona; for like the Master Blacksmiths Nakima and Kali had said to Daisy, the Alkemei Vranzer would automatically detach from anyone not worthy of wearing it.

"We got past the first major barrier," Daisy said, pulling Ramona to her feet. "You've got it on, and it's staying on. It's also synced to your elemental energy. Do you feel any different?"

"No, not really," Ramona said.

"At all?"

"I don't think so."

"Let's see if we can get it to activate."

"How do I do that? I've only ever used the Motomeru, and that one's automatic."

"You can feel the Vranzer bridging with your power, can't you? It's like any elemental tool – let your power build up inside of it. Shuttle your power into it and release through it. I'm pretty sure it can't be too different from when you were pairing your Motomeru with your old tool to scope out the Crystal Tears."

Ramona did as Daisy instructed in an attempt to activate the Vranzer, but her effort brought about no result. She tried several more times in succession, only for nothing to come about from those attempts either. In hopes that something might automatically happen, Daisy and Ramona stood there waiting for the Vranzer to activate on its own. Nothing happened in the considerable stretch of time they stayed there under the park gazebo.

"It's just not working for me, either," said Ramona, undoing and handing back the Vranzer. "I'm sorry."

Daisy grabbed the pendant, but she did not take it back right away. "Are you sure you don't want to hold onto it overnight?"

"It's not doing anything more with me than it did with you," said Ramona. "And what would even get it to activate? How would it respond? What is a 'Pendant of Fate' with 'fate-altering' powers supposed to do? How can anyone even identify something like that?"

"I don't know," said Daisy. "But we didn't know how our pendants would work when we first tried them out."

Ramona did not say anything more. She let go of the Vranzer and put her Motomeru back on. Though she had the Vranzer back in her grasp, Daisy did not reequip it.

"The Motomeru's not doing you much of any good," said Daisy. "Why don't you just keep the Vranzer? I've still got my Orianthi on me."

"No...I shouldn't," said Ramona. "Maybe Peach should give it a try."

"But she can barely do any light wielding at all, not consistently enough to say that she is a light wielder."

"I've already tried, and it hasn't worked. And I don't believe it will ever work with me... I can't handle it, Daisy. The responsibility, all on myself...it's just too much."

"You've had big responsibilities on you already. Never mind us being Kruna, and never mind what I've contributed to the team – if it weren't for *you* , we wouldn't be here. In the future, *you* brought us to the Oracle of Fates. If it weren't for you, we never would've realized it was Peach. Rosalina gave *you* the Motomeru. Out of all eight of us, she chose you to wear it."

"Why not let Rosalina try activating the Vranzer?"

"Because she's busy, and who knows when she'll be available again. Whatever she has been doing with Mario and Luigi has kept her away from us this entire time we've been dealing with MAE."

Further worry and anxiety overtook Ramona, forcing her into dumbstruck silence once again. She let herself drop back onto the bench, her eyes going to her feet. Daisy sat back down with her soon after. They did not speak for a while, instead opting to watch the people at play throughout the park.

"I'm sorry," Daisy said. "I didn't want to pressure you."

"This whole day..." mumbled Ramona. "Was it just a setup to get me more comfortable for when you asked this of me?"

"No, of course not. I would've just asked you right from the start, if that was the case. I wanted to hang out with you, and it just so happened that this was something that I needed to ask."

"Okay."

Daisy smiled and reattached the Vranzer to her neck, its gem once more turning an earth black hue. "So let's not worry about it anymore. We don't have to figure this out right away. Whether it's me who has to use it, or Peach, or you...let's just not worry about it right now. Forget I brought it up."

"This is something pretty big that you're asking me to forget," said Ramona. "You tell me that I might be the key to sealing away an

ages-old Demon God, and then you tell me to forget about it?"

"I found you!" Daisy and Ramona suddenly heard Neva yell. The two of them turned around and saw their ice wielder friend running at them from their right. As soon as she joined them under the gazebo, Neva snatched Daisy by the arm and pulled on her.

"Hey, what's up?!" Daisy said with concern.

"We're going ice skating, that's what!" Neva replied.

"Wait – since when?!" Daisy snapped. "You never mentioned anything about this to me!"

"That's because I was supposed to go ice skating with Andrew," said Neva. "But that never happened. So since that never happened, *you're* going with me instead!"

Daisy frowned. "Why now? There isn't even any ice rink open around here! It's the middle of summer – it's, like, ninety today! Plus!"

"So? Like I care?" Neva said, pulling on Daisy. "Maybe if you paid attention to your communicator thingy we ALL have, we could've gone earlier!"

"Oh," Daisy replied, smiling nervously. "I think I left that somewhere at Peach's Castle by mistake-"

Neva tugged on Daisy harder. "Let's go!"

"But, Neva..." Ramona mumbled.

"What?" Neva said.

"Daisy and I were...hanging out," said Ramona.

"Pfft – what, are you guys on a date?" Neva barked. "I didn't say you couldn't come too! Just hurry up!"

Neva had led Daisy and Ramona to a recreational center with a short field and a parking lot that a bike path ran through in a more forested, and therefore shaded, part of Toad Town. The location choice confused Daisy and Ramona, for the shade from the trees did little to ward off the steamy summer heat that likely would interfere with any instance of ice skating. Nonetheless, they followed her into the relatively vacant parking lot and waited for her next move. Neither Daisy nor Ramona knew what to expect, for none of the three had brought along ice skates.

"So, are you about to ice down the entire parking lot?" asked Daisy. "And we're just gonna slide around on our shoes?"

"You're just here for the demonstration," said Neva.

"Of what," Daisy said.

"Of a brilliant idea from a brilliant person," Neva replied.

"Athelstan's busy with Toad and Alden," said Daisy.

Neva scowled at the earth wielder. "The brilliance right in front of you, that's balancing out your soil-stupidity!"

"I don't get what's brilliant about ice skating when it's this hot," Daisy said.

"You'll see," said Neva. "I've got this all figured out."

"Neva, wouldn't it be better to wait until autumn comes around?" asked Ramona. "At least whatever ice you create wouldn't melt-"

"Don't care," Neva said. "I don't need ice to stay frozen for *this* kind of skating. I've been thinking about this, and I've already done a few trial runs myself. Remember that running fight on Pi'illo Island, where we had to chase down Chrissy while fighting those androids? That got me thinking about *my* running, and how I could move even faster. And then it came to me – I'm an *ice* wielder!"

"You mean you're just now figuring out you're an ice wielder?" said Daisy.

Neva slumped. "Why are you like this?... Anyways, then I thought, 'Hey, Daisy can cling to walls and stuff with that Crystal Grip hand trick,' so why can't I do something similar?"

"Where are you going with this?" asked Daisy.

"Over there!" Neva said, breaking out into a run. Just a quarter of the way across the long parking lot, she already had an impressive amount of speed built up. Neva then made a smooth, seamless, transition from running form to skating form right before Daisy's and Ramona's eyes. The Kruna of Ice's movement speed substantially increased as she glided on the pavement in her skating, and it stayed at a constant velocity even as she reached the opposite end of the parking lot and turned around to return to her two friends. Neva then circled Daisy and Ramona and repeated the loop around the parking lot, only this time going off into the grassy field upon reaching the lot's edge. If her speed slowed from going off-road, it did not show. She even drifted some in a few of her turns before finally coming back and skidding to a stop in front of Daisy and Ramona.

"Wow, Neva!" Ramona cheered. "That's really cool! And it's exceptionally fast too!"

"Yeah, not bad at all," said Daisy. "I'm guessing you iced the soles of your shoes somehow?"

"Yup!" Neva replied. "Had power built up and temperature cooled down, and then I did a quick-freeze on my longest stride; and then, instant all-weather, all-terrain ice skating! This is gonna be my go-to for top speed from now on. Maybe I could get Toad to make me some special freeze shoes so I could go even FASTER!"

"Definitely!" Daisy said. "That's real impressive, Neva! Awesome work!"

"I don't need your approval," Neva said. "I'm not trying to impress either of you."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Then what was the point of showing us this?"

Neva smirked with a toothy grin. "To let you know that I've got a new trick to use! See? I'm progressing. Even if I'm not the most skilled wielder on the team, I'm getting better! And, I figured out how to do something *none* of you can do! You guys better not be surprised when I'm saving all your butts ten times in fights soon! Because when I get *real* better, I'm gonna be soooooo much better than I ever was! Missions'll take four minutes to run through! No way we're gonna get captured and shoved onto some crappy game show ever again! We'll barely have to do anything because everybody'll be so scared of me! I'm a genius!"

Daisy chuckled and put her hands on her hips. "All that because you figured out how to run a little faster? By skating?"

"I HAVEN'T HAD MUCH TO GET EXCITED ABOUT!" screamed Neva. "And quit being so dense! This is step one. Numéro un. Cold under the sun... You're no fun. I just, I just gotta get more creative with ice. And then, you'll see what I mean. Just watch. I'll come up with a whole bunch of new stuff after we crush MAE!"

"That, I can't wait to see," Daisy said.

"I'm sure you can't wait," said Neva. "You seemed to be real happy about me being faster than you now."

"Huh? You think... Hahaaa! No."

"Yuh-huh, I totally am now."

"Alright, now you're just getting cocky."

"You saw for yourself how much faster I can get with my new running technique. And I wasn't even trying to go as fast as I could."

Daisy rolled her eyes. "You couldn't be faster than me even if I ran backwards."

Neva walked up to Daisy, puffing her chest up at her taller counterpart. "Well then, why don't we race and see for ourselves who's faster? I'll even let you use Nova Form! And I'll *still* beat you!"

"Don't gotta ask me twice! Where're we racing?"

"Across the parking lot, down the bike path, loop around the intersection, and then back here! You know it's uphill coming back, don't ya?"

"Totally fine with me...if you think you're up for the challenge."

"I'm up! Are you up?"

"Of course I am! Let's do this!"

Neva grinned. "So eager to lose. How about it, Ramona? Wanna watch me stomp all over some daisies? You can be our ref!... Huh, Ramona?... Uh..."

"Ramona?" Daisy murmured.

The Kruna of Light's gaze had turned blank and listless, her mouth and body quivering. Concerned, Daisy and Neva turned around to look in the direction where Ramona stared. They barely were able to catch a glimpse of a girl not much bigger than Neva peeking out from behind a tree before the girl shrank into a shadow and disappeared altogether.

"No, not again..." mumbled Ramona.

"That wasn't the same girl from earlier, was it?" Daisy asked.

"What girl?" asked Neva. "Who was that?"

"Can we p-please go back to Peach's Castle..." Ramona murmured.

"Why? Do you think she's following us now?" asked Daisy. "We could just go somewhere el-"

"I want to go back to Peach's Castle," said Ramona. "Please, can we go back to Peach's Castle. I don't want to go anywhere else today."

"Oh, then, sure," said Daisy. "We can do that..."

"Hey, what about our race?!" snapped Neva.

"Never mind that," said Daisy. "Another time. Let's go back to the castle."

"Is this you just trying to weasel your way out of losing to me?" asked Neva.

Daisy did not respond, her expression turning stern and solemn as Ramona's became more spooked. Sensing the sudden seriousness of the situation – and a large presence of energy just leave – Neva abandoned talk of any race. The three of them hurried across the parking lot and down the bike path, Ramona heading to the front and picking up the pace as they got going. Throughout their return to Peach's Castle, Ramona made unsettled glances in every direction and kept her walking speed high.

Chapter XXX

Twilight City:

For the remainder of the Kruna Yura's short break in Mushroom Kingdom, Ramona did not want to go anywhere. She barely went outside, confining herself to Peach's Castle and never leaving alone. Seeing how nervous and stressed the dark and mysterious girl first seen at the Milk Bar had made Ramona, and knowing that Ramona could still be a candidate for activating the Vranzer, Daisy opted to delay any further discussion about the Vranzer with Ramona or anyone else. Daisy had more immediate concern over Ramona's state of mind and the girl that they had caught watching them. Though Daisy stayed with Ramona often, Ramona told her very little about the girl. They did not see the girl again by the time the Kruna were ready to carry out an assault through Twilight City.

It took Toad and Alden nearly a week – with Athelstan's help – to complete the crucial upgrades for the Kruna Yura's current set of elemental tools. The six Kruna met with Toad and Alden in their workshop within Bowser's Palace early in the morning and reclaimed their tools with the intention of heading out to Twilight City and storming Evershade Valley as soon as possible for what they hoped would be the decisive, final infiltration they would have to make against MAE. When they got their respective tools back, they noticed that each piece of equipment now had at least two long black bars or sections integrated into their build. Each tool also now had a small, gappy metal bracing in areas near the tubules that lit up and held elemental power in storage, along with an electrical icon near the brace base.

"Introducing your newly upgraded *Volt Fusion Elemental Tools* !" Toad declared. "These tools retain the ability to store any excess elemental energies you have, but they now come with added offensive features that separate them from the other tools of our Energizer Series!"

"What features?" said Alden.

"I'm glad you asked!" exclaimed Toad. "First of all, they now produce electricity! In 'borrowing' some MAE Patrol Bots, we've been able to integrate some of their tech into your tools to achieve this ability! Your tools now convert stored elemental power within their energy reservoir tubules into electricity and unleash it in conjunction with whatever elemental attack you use them for!"

"Wait – it does that *every time* we do something elemental?" asked Bowser.

"Yes!" said Toad. "Unless there is no reserve power within the tool, in which case your elements will work as normal. And that leads into the second improvement, which is optimization and increased storage capacity of elemental energy for each tool, which should compensate for the extra energy cost that will result from the electrical output."

"Couldn't you have done something like put in a switch for the electricity?" asked Neva. "And these seem kinda bulky compared to what they were before."

Toad glared at Neva. "Wha- we, you- you must not get just how much effort it takes to do the things we do for you! For free, at that! We've turned our skills into a business that everyone else has to pay for, but *you* don't have to do a thing but wait! We were trying to get these done as fast as possible, and we didn't have time to put in a switch function or try and keep things the same size without reworking the insides altogether! That alone likely would have meant you would have had to stay here for at least twice as long! There's still something *else* these can do; but if these aren't good enough for you, go ahead and try running through Twilight City without these tools and see how far you get!"

Neva sighed. "You're right... I'm sorry, Toad. And Alden."

"Hey! I pitched in too!" said Athelstan.

"At least she's getting better at apologizing," Alden said.

"Anyways, the Volt Fusion tools now also have magnetic properties," said Toad. "Those work in conjunction with the electrical function.

The Magnacores we developed will complete a three-pronged attack by pulsing out magnetic forces that will stun and disrupt MAE's tech. Each Magnacore works on its own without the need for a power source, for it is constructed primarily with fairly strong magnets."

"Which is actually why we only recommend that you use these Volt Fusion tools against MAE," said Alden. "Outside of applications against MAE's tech, using these Volt Fusion tools can get really weird, considering any elemental usage through them will also have electrical and magnetic charge. We wish we could've made these tools a little more flexible, but time constraints and such, you know."

Daisy smirked. "Oh, don't worry about it! Sounds like the wait was already well worth it regardless! Awesome job, guys!"

"Oh, great!" Alden replied. "Because we're actually pretty burned out ourselves..."

Bowser gave Toad and Alden a nod. "We won't let your work go to waste."

"One extra note on the Volt Fusion electrical capacities," said Toad. "Now though the electricity these tools can generate can not match the same electrical power an air wielder can create through lightning, it should be enough to result in substantial damage to MAE's robots and technology. And in the case of Marut, we expect he can add his lightning to the artificial electricity from the tools for one combined, electric burst with significantly more power. The same can be said for its magnetic properties in relation to an ice wielder's magnetic power."

"So you basically gave us elemental control *outside* of our elements?" asked Ramona.

"Kinda, but not really," said Toad. "You can't use either boost without your element, and I don't think we'll ever reach a point where synthetic powers like these can match what an elemental wielder can naturally produce."

"Hopefully, it stays that way," said Bowser. "Whether as a result of MAE or otherwise, the day that happens may be the day wielding

truly starts to die out."

Daisy put her newly upgraded Laser Drill Staff in its holster across her back and peered at each of her present teammates. "If we're all reequipped now, how about we get going?"

"Which way am I flying the cruiser?" asked Bowser.

"Considering its location, it doesn't really matter," said Athelstan. "West may be somewhat faster, but if I remember correctly, we'll have to circle around to the west of Twilight City and enter through there anyways because of Evershade Valley's northeast position and its mountain enclosure; and Warra had said that Evershade Valley was too well-defensed to enter from above. So it's whether you guys want to take the scenic route across the Arlan, or prefer to stare at water more by going across the Pyrimies. There'll be more places to stop if needed should we go east; but either way, it'll be a long and lengthy trip. And we can't just fit the huge Koopa Cruiser into a bunch of tiny Warp Pipes either."

"We'll have to make at least one stop," said Bowser. "So, we may as well go east. No chance we're getting there any sooner than this time tomorrow."

"We're all ready to go, right?" Daisy said to the Kruna. "There's no turning back once we get moving, because we're not wasting time on a return trip until our job's done."

"If you're not ready, do what you need to do; and then come back here," added Bowser.

An extended trip east brought the Kruna Yura, thirty hours later and after an overnight stop in an unpopulated northern woodland, to MAE Twilight City. The stage was set for an evening-late night run through Neva's hometown and into Evershade Valley, a mission that, if all went well, would bring about the likely destruction of the MAE organization. They had nowhere else left to go for their current campaign against MAE. With the setting sun behind them, the six Kruna Yura closed in on the looming, futuristic city sitting in front of

the mountains holding MAE Command Center. Bowser chose a field to the southwest far enough away from the city to safely park the cruiser in but close enough to put the Kruna in walking distance.

A cool summer evening with stars already shining in the sky before the sun's glow faded backdropped the Kruna Yura's approach to Twilight City. The Kruna got off of the field and stepped onto a long, open highway leading into the destination ahead, likely with a mile and a half to go before entering the brooding metropolis. Traffic passed by every so often in either direction; but for the most part otherwise, their march towards Twilight City remained calm and serene with minimal noise.

"Alright, guys; this is it," said Daisy. "This is the endgame here. We tear through Twilight City, we get a clear shot to Evershade Valley, and, when this night is over, we convert MAE into wreckage and scrap metal."

"How long is this gonna take?" Marut asked.

"As long as we make it take," said Bowser. "No nonsense here."

"Right," said Daisy. "Absolutely none."

Marut gulped and took a deep breath. "Roger that!"

"How does it feel to be back here, Neva?" asked Ramona.

"I sure don't miss it," Neva replied. "How's that?"

"Oh..." said Ramona. "That's...that's it?"

"I've got no attachment to this place anymore," said Neva. "We can level it, for all I care."

Once the first of MAE Twilight City's buildings came into focus, the Kruna felt the flat highway start inclining and elevating off of ground level as it fed into the metropolis. At that point, the Kruna organized themselves into a spread formation; Neva and Athelstan center and front, Daisy on the left, Marut flanking the right, Ramona at the true middle, and Bowser in the back. From overhead, their formation almost resembled a directional arrow.

Soon, the highway curved right to enter MAE Twilight City proper. A grand but gloomy urban void awaited them, with the only glimpse of the outside world that the Kruna would see for the duration of their mission that night now shrinking behind them. And then Twilight City consumed them. Now, the world around them consisted of nothing but harsh architecture and cold metal.

"We're in," said Daisy.

Twilight City, although built-up much like many of MAE's other territories, appeared as a considerably darker and harsher metropolis in comparison, due in part to its bold and predominantly purple, red, and green coloration. It was the most urban MAE region that the Kruna had visited, aside from possibly Diamond City. As for why Twilight City seemed grungy compared to other MAE-controlled territories, almost none of the Kruna could tell. Athelstan thought that its close proximity to Evershade Valley, a starkly dark place in its own right, contributed to its own gritty look. Neva, a Twilight City native, did not seem at all surprised with its current state.

"What a place this is," mumbled Athelstan. "People still live here?"

"Twilight City has always been a drab place," said Neva. "It's supposed to be dreary, and it was already pretty high-tech before MAE took it over. It's a lot more industrial than I remember, but...this is just about what I thought I'd see."

"We're still slanting uphill," said Ramona. "This highway's going pretty high..."

"That's what makes it a *highway* , am I right?" said Athelstan. "Ah? Ah?"

"Oh no, bro – that was terrible!" Marut groaned.

"Most of the highways here are elevated," said Neva. "That leaves plenty of space for the normal roads with traffic lights down on the ground. A lot of times, you'll have a highway passing over a highway branching off of a different highway over a street. Out in the two suburbs south and northwest of the city, the highways generally aren't elevated off the ground."

The group kept straight when the highway split off into two other exits, the left exit dipping down while the right exit stayed level and the continuing highway ahead kept elevating up to a bump not much further away from the divergence. When the Kruna reached the peak of the bump, the highway leveled off and reestablished a more or less flat level. Cars on tires and cars with special anti-gravity technology either drove past the Kruna or joined their current route through entry ramps from other highways or streets below.

"It's like they built a bridge over the city," said Ramona. "I hope accidents don't occur too often up here, or that would be especially bad for the people down below."

"That's why the guardrails are high and thick," said Neva. "I mean, it's not a hundred percent foolproof..."

"Nothing'll ruin your day quite like a car dropping eighty yards onto your head," said Athelstan.

"That's how high we are?" asked Marut.

"Probably," said Athelstan. "It's nothing like Bellbridge in Sarasaland, of course."

"Looks like there's a lot going on down there," said Daisy, peering over the hollow highway median gap. Twilight City's ground level was as busy as any dense city's streets and intersections.

"I think we should keep most of the travel on the highways," said Athelstan. "We'll encounter less interference than if we went down into the streets. I imagine we'll have to get off the highways at some point before entering Evershade Valley. I don't believe that the highways run through there, do they?"

Neva shook her head. "Not unless MAE added some when they took over."

"Wait, why go where there's less MAE forces?" asked Marut. "I thought part of our mission here involved smashing up as many robo-dudes as we could find!"

"Yeah, but finding Chrissy and capturing MAE Command Center is

the primary objective," said Daisy. "The extra carnage is a bonus but is not the priority yet. Make no mistake though – anyone and anything that wants to get in our way is getting wrecked."

"Really, we should be expecting that MAE will send everything they've got at us anyways," said Bowser. "So we shouldn't have to actively seek out trouble. It'll come to us."

"And by 'interference,' I mostly meant civilian presence and issues with space," said Athelstan. "It looks pretty cramped down there."

A yellow sedan coming up from behind the Kruna slowed down, its horn sounding off in rapid repetition. An angry man in a suit popped his head out of the window and flicked his wrist at Daisy and Neva. "What the hell is wrong with you people?!" he shouted. "Get outta the road, ya damn wannabe gangster hobo hippies! People got places to go!"

"I ain't speeding up for nobody!" said Neva.

The man kept honking his horn. "You wanna get run over?!"

"Who's stopping you?!" Neva screamed.

"Oh, screw you people – I don't have time for this crap!" the man said, scowling and hitting buttons on his dashboard. The tires in his car rotated inwards, and an anti-gravity function activated. After flying his car over and past the Kruna, he stomped on his accelerator and sped away up the road.

"Why didn't ya just do that in the FIRST PLACE?!" Daisy yelled at the car.

Another set of cars rode through, honking their horns at the Kruna moments later as well. However, the noise of sirens sounding off made the drivers speed away from the scene in a hurry. From the rapidly-increasing volume of the sirens, the Kruna could tell that the source of the noise was nearing them, which all but guaranteed an imminent encounter with the first wave of Twilight City defense. Karts, trucks, and vans approaching from the opposite side of the highway across the median and from one of the entry ramps the

Kruna had just passed came to a skidding halt and dispatched dozens of MAE units ready to attack.

Roller Defenders rolled out of the vehicles to the front of the group of MAE Patrol Bots and Titan Force D-series Restrainers. The four-legged, reptilian Roller Defenders stopped their coordinated tumble a moderate distance away from the Kruna and unloaded their electrical arm cannons at maximum power. Bowser, Marut, Ramona, and Neva sufficiently nullified MAE's quick-striking offensive through a combined circumferential twisting flare of elementals, which left Athelstan to jar some of the road loose and bash the Roller Defenders of the rear MAE group. At the end of her team's defense, Daisy leapt skyward at the lead MAE group in front of them with her Laser Drill Staff up and ready for a brutish slam.

In tandem with the seismic power brimming around it, Daisy's upgraded staff also built up electricity and a rippling magnetic field. Through little fault of their own, the Titan Force D-Series Restrainers missed all of the shots they fired at Daisy during her hang time. The robots did genuinely miss many of their shots, but all of the electrical bursts that would have and *should* have hit her either fizzled out before contact or got diverted just enough to avoid her as a result of the potent magnetic disruption her staff created. Unharmed, Daisy landed with a smack of her staff on the asphalt to unleash the three-pronged assault of seismic earth power, electricity, and magnetic forces on the MAE squadron. A large majority of the Patrol Bots, Roller Defenders, and even some of the Titan Force D-Series Restrainers suffered extensive damage – primarily internal – and collapsed. Their circuitry fried and ruined, the robots unfortunate enough to experience the shocks and magnetic discharge from Daisy's staff never moved again.

The other Kruna followed Daisy's lead with their own elements and their respective Volt Fusion-upgraded tools. With just half the effort it would have required otherwise, the Kruna Yura flattened both MAE squadrons. None of the MAE robots could hold up against the triple-threat elemental-electric-magnetics combination each Kruna could now utilize. The few MAE officials that headed the robot squadrons drove away in a frantic hurry, leaving behind the broken, inoperable bodies and screaming into their radios for backup.

"Man, it ain't take long for them to find us at all!" said Marut. "We didn't even do anything to draw any attention toward us!"

"I don't think we had to," said Bowser. "They must have anticipated us coming at some point. They expected we'd be here. They had to. And they had defenses on the trigger to fire off the moment whatever surveillance they have picked up on us."

Daisy frowned. "I don't care if they anticipated us or not – they can't stop us. They won't!"

"Be aware that we could very well end up dealing with much more than we thought we would," stated Bowser. "If they expected an offensive from us, I can only imagine that they had beefed up what Warra said was already a very tough defense force."

"Yup, this is gonna be a knock-down-drag-out fight night to remember," said Athelstan.

Just before Athelstan fixed the sections of the road he had ripped up, Bowser spoke against it. "Leave them up! That should slow anyone trying to come at us from behind."

"Hey, this Volt Fusion is looking pretty clean though," said Marut. "I'm not worried about how much comes."

"Yeah, these tools are pretty crazy!" said Daisy. "It's making this feel like we're in a video game!"

"Yeah!" hollered Marut.

"We still don't need them flying at us all at once," said Bowser. "We're running a mission, not taking on a challenge. This is going to be hard enough as it is. Let's not help them."

Athelstan knelt by one of the many deactivated Titan Force D-Series Restrainers. "Well, before we get moving again, I would like to check a little something out..."

Using a few careful strikes of his hammer and some brute force pulling by hand, Athelstan removed much of the front armor and plating of the D-Restrainer's torso. He kept removing pieces and

components to go deeper into the inside of the robot's body until he noticed a bright glow coming from within. When he shifted a few more pieces of the robot's insides around, he uncovered a golden, eight-pronged medallion-like star inside of a cracked power cell attached to several wires, cables, and metals.

"Shine Sprite core..." murmured Athelstan. "Looks like this one is still intact. The casing's a little messed up, but the Shine Sprite itself is fine. I wonder if this is a synthesized one like Chrissy said they can make..."

"How can you tell if it is?" asked Neva.

Athelstan shrugged. "If there's one of these in every single MAE robot, it's almost impossible that they'd be natural. They have to be creating these things. Think about the thousands of bots we've fought through. If they figured out how to successfully create their own, there's little to be gained and a lot of time and manpower to be lost searching for and gathering natural ones."

"Should we do something about their Shine Sprites?" asked Ramona. "Like, make sure they're all destroyed, or something?"

"For what?" said Daisy. "We haven't worried about them before."

"Yeah, but, maybe, if the robots are still running because of them..." Ramona mumbled.

"There's no need," said Athelstan. "The robots are all already busted. If the Shine Sprites are still fine, that doesn't automatically mean that these robots will all rise again. That's like trying to stick a light bulb in a lamp that's broken, or plugging in a dead TV into an outlet. All the power in the world won't help ya if you're trying to use something that just doesn't work."

"You done inspecting that, so we can go?" asked Daisy.

Athelstan nodded and stood up. "Yes. I think so. It just baffles me how they've been able to do the things they've been doing. They're so much more ahead of the rest of the world's societies. It's so improbable that they've accomplished all of this. The Learners must

be an incredibly smart and gifted group of geniuses..."

The six Kruna Yura continued on up the highway, a road that became less straight and more irregular than they expected at first. Some sections of the highway were anchored to taller buildings, in addition to the many pillars holding them up from below. The highway went through many more turns and curves the further they moved into the city, and plenty of encounters with incoming MAE squadrons halted their progress. Though, thanks to their Volt Fusion elemental tools, the Kruna carved through all of the MAE Twilight City defenders that challenged them.

Difficulty against MAE forces had still spiked compared to other regions, for the sheer number and size of MAE's presence made for a constant and frequent stop and go of fighting that dramatically slowed down the Kruna's forward progression. MAE Twilight City without a doubt had the thickest and most dense defense the Kruna have had to face so far; and for all they knew, MAE Evershade Valley could present an even greater line of defense, if not equal. In just getting past three more well-distanced exit ramps on their current highway, the Kruna had to destroy well over two hundred MAE robots between all the squadrons and groups that attacked them. Those numbers included several of the newer and exceptionally strong Wingweaver Disrupter Units, large and angelic androids with three pairs of wings each that could blow blistering wind gusts and discharge electrical bursts.

"How do we keep running into these dudes?" Daisy said as Bowser finished off the last of yet another MAE robot group. "I know the defense here is stacked, but it's like we're getting hit with something every two minutes."

"Man, I wish we had a map," said Athelstan. "All I can go off of are the signs. We're on Route M-45, if that helps. And that first highway we passed when we entered was M-245. I wonder if maybe we're on a bypass? No, this could be a main route through the city; I definitely don't think it's a spur route. What if we-"

"HEY! Move it!" a woman yelled out of an SUV behind the Kruna.

Daisy's face lit up with anger. "Can't you people just drive around

us?! I swear, if it's not these damn robots, it's you idiots honking your horns and screaming when there's three other lanes open!"

"Nobody told you to go running on a highway!" the woman shouted, pushing her vehicle past the Kruna.

"It's past rush hour, ain't it?!" Daisy yelled at the SUV speeding away. "This is about as open as a highway's gonna get before dark! Use the space instead of complaining!"

The group saw the woman stick a hand out of her window to make an obscene gesture with her fingers, but she said nothing. Another car rode past the Kruna, blasting its horn even though it drove with its tires in anti-gravity mode.

"Somebody should really give these people some tickets," said Ramona.

"For speeding, or road rage?" asked Athelstan.

"Both," said Bowser. "At least both for that one guy earlier that parked and got out of his car with a wrench."

"The people here really got a bad attitude, don't they?" said Marut.

"Yeah, that hasn't changed," grumbled Neva.

The frequency of MAE squadrons that attacked the six Kruna Yura let up for a while through several more exit zones before sharply escalating until they got to a four-leg intersection with another highway higher up. There, the Kruna encountered a heavy presence of MAE robots. No visible organic officials stood alongside the group; though, not at first. Only after clearing away the last batch of robots in a fiery, electromagnetic explosion backed with light energy and crackling earth power did the Kruna see the two people heading the squadron on the other side, one of them still blurred out by residual robot smoke. The smaller of the two looked all too familiar at this point, standing next to her special flying Spear bike.

"Hey, look!" said Ramona. "It's Chrissy!"

"Nice," said Daisy. "Nowhere for her to run to now!"

Chrissy frowned. "You people again – of all places..."

"Your game show sucked," Bowser said to Chrissy.

"What kind of show's on for one episode and then immediately gets canceled?" said Marut.

"You're far too resilient," said Chrissy. "How you could have made it *this* far into Twilight City baffles me, but you're not making it any further."

Daisy put her hands on her hips and smirked. "Oh, really? Who says? You? Or one of your robots?"

"Can't be one of the robots, because we destroyed all the ones with her," said Athelstan.

"You're going to pay for all of this," Chrissy hissed.

"That's what your R.O.B. said," replied Daisy.

"Enough with your smart mouth," said Chrissy. "My patience for you has long since worn thin."

Daisy folded her arms, puffing her chest up. "Then do something about it already! You want me to shut up, make me shut up!"

But with all the focus on Chrissy, the Kruna Yura overlooked the fact that someone else of note was next to her. There stood a familiar, shadow wielder of curly black hair and dark tan complexion in a black-necked white shirt, purple pants with a white stripe inside two black ones along his hips, and black shoes. The shadow wielder also had a short, energized black sword slung around his back that possessed purple-glowing tubules. They identified him as soon as the haze from the destroyed robots cleared and revealed the bright brown irises of his eyes centering on them. Utter disbelief comprised the Kruna's collective reaction.

Neva felt her body go numb when she saw his gaze. "Andrew..."

Chapter XXXI

The Shadow Striker Returns:

"Andrew?" Ramona said, confused.

Neva could feel her eyes watering and her body trembling at the sight of Andrew and his face. "Is that...really him?"

"How can it *not* be?" said Marut. "He looks exactly like him!"

"He's got the same exact scarring too," Ramona murmured, staring at his left arm.

"Yeah, he's just missing his Alkemei," said Athelstan. "It's really him! Tough body, doe eyes, and all!"

"Isn't it a little weird calling a dude 'doe-eyed?' " said Daisy.

"He also sneezes like a girl, so what does it matter?" replied Athelstan. "Yeah. I remember that. No way I'm forgetting that."

"The man, the myth, the legend!" Marut called out. "What's goin' on, my dude?! Where ya been?"

Andrew did not react to Marut in any way other than presenting an awkward, puzzled stare. He glanced at Chrissy for a brief moment, who gave nothing away in her expression other than muted annoyance and anger over yet another encounter with the Kruna Yura.

"Uh...dude?" said Marut.

"Why isn't he coming over here?" murmured Bowser. "And why is he with Chrissy?"

Neva could not contain herself any longer. "Andrew, I...I..."

"Neva, wait!" Daisy called out.

The ice wielder had broke out into a run, crying emotion-dense tears on her way towards Andrew with her arms up and ready to grab him. Unfortunately for her, those tears turned sour and anguished when she saw Andrew scowl and step backwards. Neva soon cut off her run and stopped just before reaching him.

"What's your deal?" Andrew spat out.

Neva gasped. "Wh-what kind of question is that?! Why ya backing away from me?! C'mon, Andrew...it's been forever-"

"Who's Andrew?" asked Andrew.

Daisy gave the Kruna Yura of Shadow a weird look. "You're Andrew, boy. Did you forget your own name?"

"I'm definitely not any Andrew," Andrew said. The remark made Ramona flinch and wriggle in place, but she stayed silent and did not speak up.

"Uh, yeah, you are, dude," said Neva. "Don't be an idiot. What? All that dark stuff made your brain black out or something?"

Andrew frowned in annoyance. "No, I'm just not Andrew."

"Alright, man," Neva muttered. "I know you like to be a comedian and all, but this is not even slightly funny."

"Good, because I'm not laughing," Andrew replied. "Chrissy, is anything I'm doing seeming funny to you at all?"

Chrissy shook her head. "No, not at all."

"There ya go," Andrew said to Neva.

"Hey – what are you even doing with *her* in the first place?!" snapped Neva.

"What do you mean?" growled Andrew. "That's my friend and partner. What am I supposed to do? Attack her?"

"Actually, yes," said Athelstan.

Andrew raised an eyebrow in further confusion. "What?"

"Athelstan's right," said Daisy. "You gotta get away from her, Andrew! She's no good!"

"Didn't I just get through saying that I'm not Andrew?" said Andrew.

"How can you not be?" said Neva. "You look just like him, you act just like him, and you're as stupidly stubborn as he is! And what's this friend-partner business *?* "

"My name is 'Joey Grayson,' " said Andrew. "I've never received any mention of the name 'Andrew' in the past. Not towards me."

"Screw that – you're Andrew, damn it, and that's that!" Neva yelled. "Don't try to argue it!"

"This is absurd," said Ramona. "Does the name 'Andrew Mitchell' seriously not mean anything to you?"

Andrew shook his head. "Other than that Kruna of Shadow who went missing months ago, no."

"But that's *you* !" hollered Marut.

"I am a MAE operative, not one of you," said Andrew.

"Okay, hold on," said Daisy. "We're your friends, and you're telling us that you don't remember us at all? Not even Ramona?"

"No," Andrew said, drawing another conspicuous flinch out of Ramona. "Can't remember anyone I've never met."

"Not even me?" Neva weakly asked.

Again, Andrew shook his head. "No...but I was told that there was a chance I might encounter you lot and would then have to arrest you." His frown turned into a wide-eyed smirk. "Really though – since we're all here, I can just cross that little objective off right now."

Athelstan let out an anxious exhale. "Oh boy! This is *not* how things were supposed to go!"

"Andrew, you've got to remember one of us!" Daisy pleaded. "Come on, man! You can't just forget friends like that!"

"We were never friends!" Andrew replied, bewildered. "I've never even met you before! Who do you people think you are?"

"Your friends, jackass!" Neva yelled. "Did you get hit in the head at some point and forget?"

"No, I just don't remember any of you!" Andrew growled.

"Oh, you gotta remember *me,* dude," said Marut. "Don't you remember all those video games I whooped you in?"

Andrew's anguished glare stayed the same. He shook his head, saying nothing.

"Really?" said Marut. "How can you not remember all those times gettin' bodied?"

"I remember beating someone at every game he tried to get me to play," said Andrew.

"You totally did not, dude!" Marut snapped. He looked to his left and right at the other Kruna. "I swear! He totally didn't!"

"I did," replied Andrew. "I didn't say it was you. Seriously – I don't know how you're all thinking I'm this 'Andrew' character, but cut it out already!"

Athelstan raised a finger. "Okay, well, here's one way to prove who you are! Break out into a rant over how irritated you get when people complain about cold weather!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked Daisy.

"Because that's something Andrew would do," said Athelstan.

Andrew folded his arms and grunted. "Andrew's right in doing so. This planet is way too hot as it is. I seriously don't get you people – all of y'all who want to sit out and bake in the sun and then run in fear whenever the temperature dips under sixty, you're all crazy!

Then you want to bulletproof yourself in an armored layer of ten sweaters and jackets just to go from your heated houses to your heated cars. Y'all act like you can't make your own body heat and that you'll crumble to pieces if you feel the slightest bit of chill on your skin. *Refreshing* chill, I'll add. I swear, what kind of foolishness-"

"There ya go," Athelstan said to the other Kruna. "Oh, 'Joey,' can you swim?"

"What? No," Andrew barked with a grimace. "Hell no. I'm not getting in any water. Now I know y'all crazy."

"And there's your insurance," Athelstan then said to the group.

"Joey, stay focused," said Chrissy. "Don't chit-chat with the enemy."

"Huh?" said Andrew. "Oh, right. Sorry... These guys are super confusing."

"He doesn't remember a thing," said Bowser. "He must be suffering from some kind of amnesia."

"That's the only thing that makes sense," said Daisy. "He must be. He wouldn't be like this otherwise."

"Listen to you, trying to blame this all on amnesia when that has nothing to do with anything," said Chrissy. "Joey here made a conscious decision to help MAE."

"You shut up, ya prissy tech-head!" Neva yelled. "Nobody's talking to you!"

The next instant, a shadow bolt flew at Neva. The Kruna of Ice entered a furious backpedal when she saw it coming, almost stumbling in her avoidance of the burst that only just narrowly missed her feet and struck the Route M-45 asphalt instead. When Neva stopped her momentum, her vision went straight to Andrew and his raised, wispy hand. A suffocating upheaval of distress then welled up inside of her and coated her eyes in water.

"Andrew..." Neva mumbled.

"Don't talk like that to her," said Andrew. "I've just about had it with you people already, and I've been sharp all day."

"Sharp?" asked Bowser. "What do you mean by that?"

"Whenever Andrew's sharp, it means he's in an extremely bitter and volatile mood," said Ramona. "Like, extra sensitive and touchy. And you don't want to touch him the wrong way, because you'll get cut."

"So he remembers that he can get 'sharp,' but he doesn't remember any of us?" said Bowser.

"It has to be amnesia," said Daisy. "Either that, or they must have done something to his mind or got him under some mind control trick. There's no way he'd just turn like this on his own."

"Is that the truth, or is that what you want to think?" said Chrissy. "Here's how reality really works: you think you know some people, but you actually don't. Even if it's someone you really trust – maybe you look up to them, maybe you bonded with them, maybe you loved them, maybe they were the most important thing to you in the world...but you know what? Maybe it all just wasn't. Ever. Mutual."

Tears overflowed over Neva's face as Chrissy continued. "And then what? You're just left with broken hearts, broken pieces of dreams, broken souls – just, *everything* breaks. Perceived reality. It crashes and falls apart to make way for unified reality. The cold, harsh reality you don't want to face. Maybe deep down, you knew it all along and refused to accept it, so you went on living under this facade you wouldn't let yourself believe wasn't real. Just a simple self-defense mechanism that you made up because, in actuality, you just don't want to have to face yourself. Your real self and what you really are. Having to face yourself could very likely even make you worse off. But that's how things work. We're all just imperfect and terribly flawed beings that have no control or sense of stability in the grand scheme of things. And then the time comes when our dearest companions realize that and move on, leaving us behind..."

"Andrew, do you really not remember *any* of us at all?" Ramona asked.

"I'm not Andrew, and I've never met any of you before," Andrew replied. "That's the LAST time I'm saying that." He paused and lowered his tone to a mere murmur when he continued. "I'm trying to remember, believe me. But I can't. It's that simple. And if I can't remember, then, as far as I'm concerned, none of it ever happened."

Neva staggered further away from Chrissy and Andrew, her teeth clenched and her body jittery. Her pale skin soon brightened to a popping scarlet hue before she screamed hard enough to hurt her voice. "Then...then FINE! WE'RE DONE! ALRIGHT?! It's over! Screw you, dude! Screw you! You have me worrying for so long, and *this* is what I get? This is what's been going on? No – I'm done with you! Go die, you jackass!"

Andrew cupped his hands on his arms and gave a cocky smirk. "I don't know what you're getting so worked up about. Now you're acting like I was your boyfriend or something – is that what I'm supposed to get from this? Nah, I'll have no part of that mess. What could you ever see in someone like me? I'm not the relationship type, not cut out for that kind of thing. It would never work for me, and certainly not with you. I don't even know who you are."

Overwhelmed, Neva let loose a voluminous flood of tears. "DON'T TALK TO ME ANYMORE! I HATE YOU! GO TO HELL AND ROT!"

With a closed-eye sigh, Andrew shook his head. "You shouldn't be getting mad at me, but whatever. So no matter how much I try to say otherwise, you still think I'm your 'Andrew' guy, huh? As far as I know, he went missing quite a long time ago. That's what the data shows for him. Maybe he's even dead. And to that, I say, 'good riddance.' That saves everyone a lot of trouble."

Daisy smiled. "You know what? You can stay as 'Joey' all you want. You're still Andrew to me."

Andrew's smile faded into a blank expression. "You're just going to stay stuck in the past then? That's depressing to hear."

"Not as depressing as the past ten minutes have been," said Marut.

"Do you even know what your past is?" Daisy asked.

"No..." said Andrew. "But it doesn't matter to me. Call me whatever you want. It won't matter in the end. All that matters is my present and future. MAE enlisted me for a special purpose that only I can fulfill. Let's make this as clear as possible for you; as the most powerful elemental wielder currently alive, my primary objective is to take down and apprehend the world's most elite wielders. Including you. Get it?"

"Most powerful? You?" Daisy said. She glanced at Ramona for just a few seconds before locking her sights on Andrew and smirking. "Ha! Sorry, dude; but if they were looking for the most powerful wielder, I don't get why they recruited you instead of trying to get me!"

Andrew's wide-eyed smile returned, this time appearing more intimidating than before. "Enough talk. There's no time for any more of these mind games. I'm tired of using my mouth, and I've got but only so much time to hang out here. You interrupted us and our pursuit of other targets, but I think arresting the Kruna Yura is more important than chasing some rabbits in hats, huh?"

Chrissy giggled with a hand over her mouth. "Oh, of course it is, Joey. We can leave the lesser criminals to the Patrol Bots."

As Andrew raised a fist and let dark energy pulse out of it, Daisy gave him a long, unblinking stare. She never expected to have to fight against him in an antagonistic way; but then again, she had thought the same of Warra. Now, Andrew prepared himself for battle. Bowser, Athelstan, Marut, and Neva did as well, all while Chrissy seemed to grow more amused with the situation.

For whatever reason, the Kruna Yura found themselves facing off against another one of their teammates. But because of who was on the other end this time, the situation felt different to Daisy. She wondered if that could have been her next to Chrissy instead of Andrew. Then, her mind flashed back to the previous face-offs she had in the past against Grekka, Elkon, and Marissa. A question of what-if scenarios echoed in her mind, making her ponder over what drives people into the decisions they choose and what it could take for someone's fate to alter without warning. Fate seemed like such a slippery, slopping path with countless forks and branches that could

lead to any number of paths as similar or as different as possible to their adjacent, alternate routes.

In that way, she felt a link connecting the five of them together. All five of them felt tarnished, tainted, and scarred to varying degrees under the burdens of despair, anguish, self-hatred and loathing, anger, and frustration over their pasts. And because of how similar each of them felt; Grekka, Elkon, Marissa – and now, Andrew – all served as examples and reminders of outcomes that could have occurred for Daisy herself. By extension, Warra fit too. And, for a limited time, so did Bowser. Every last one of them represented a different version of the same occurrence and aftermath; the end result of what happens when someone loses their way and slips and falls onto the wrong path when things do not go well or when things fall apart.

Daisy had little time to think about it all in that moment, for Andrew had grown impatient. He raised his charging hand overhead, shadow power wafting and raging over him. His expression darkened as more of his power flooded out; at least, momentarily, it did. When he brought his arm down in front of him, his face and body language flipped on its head and turned playful. Then the playfulness mixed together with fierceness in a hostile simper when he set himself up in an aggressive, forward-leaning, asymmetrical stance.

"Yeah, he's definitely serious about all of this," said Bowser.

"Was there any doubt?" asked Athelstan. "He seemed pretty serious the whole time to me."

Daisy shook her head and broke out of the trance she had put herself in. After gazing at Andrew for a few more seconds, she let out a heavy breath and glanced at each of her teammates. "All of you, stand down," she said.

"Huh? Why?" asked Bowser.

"Because we don't need to gang up on him to beat him," said Daisy. "One of us'll be plenty. I'll just knock him around a bit and that'll be the end of it."

Andrew's eyes widened, his gaze centering on Daisy. He said nothing.

"Are you sure about that, Daisy?" asked Neva.

"Oh yeah!" Daisy happily replied. "This guy's easy! Just leave it to me!"

Andrew chuckled and suppressed his charged power, breaking his stance some. "Me? Easy?"

Daisy pointed at Andrew. "I've seen you more than enough to know how you operate. And let me tell ya; there's a lotta holes in your style."

"You *think* you've seen me," Andrew corrected. "Look – if you want to do this solo, then fine. Let's just do it already!"

Daisy's smile broadened. "Okay-"

Andrew grimaced and ducked under Daisy's speedy, spontaneous lunging kick. He snatched her by the collar of her shirt as she passed him, spun around with her momentum, and lifted her off the asphalt with the intention of throwing her, only for her to then grab onto him the instant he let go. Daisy then flipped him up in the air and delivered a jumping uppercut into his back. On his way down, Andrew twirled and tried to regain control of himself; but Daisy then bashed her elbow into him before he could react in time. Andrew bounced and hit the highway ground behind and off to the side of Chrissy, who now glared at Daisy.

"What?" Daisy asked. "Oh, was I supposed to just let him throw me? My bad."

Chrissy scowled. "Joey! Forget arresting them! Kill them all! Right here! Make a mess out of them!"

Andrew growled and grunted as he got back to his feet. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" Chrissy demanded. "Eliminate them all! I want them dead!"

"I could care less if they're dead or not," said Andrew, wagging his finger at the MAE commander. "I'm not with you to kill any wielders. I'm just arresting them."

"Don't defy a direct order!" snapped Chrissy. "I am your superior! You answer to me and do as I want! And I want them dead!"

"Too bad," said Andrew. "I'm gonna do my thing, and you're gonna do your thing after I'm finished. What you do when I'm done with them is none of my concern, got it?"

"What am I hearing right now..." Ramona murmured to herself, deathly pale-faced.

The very next instant, Chrissy got up in Andrew's face and backhanded him across the side of his head. Then she did it again from the other side. Then again. And a fourth time. Each hit had struck harder than the last, as evidenced from the audible smacking sound the other Kruna heard.

"Don't you understand who these people are?!" Chrissy barked. "They're a threat to everything we've worked for! We can not allow them free passage into the Command Center! They will wreak havoc everywhere! *Kill them* , Joey! Here and now!"

"Alright...now you're just making me mad," Andrew spat out, wincing.

"Good! Take it out on them!" Chrissy yelled, an arm shooting up at the Kruna.

Andrew clutched at his face and pushed past the MAE commander glaring at him. As he drew nearer to her, Daisy could see the splotchy, deep marks of dark red burning through his cheeks. Such early-stage bruises became visible to everyone once Andrew took his hands off of his face.

"That's pretty sad, Chrissy," said Daisy. "He called you his 'friend and partner,' and you do *that?* "

"He misspoke just a little bit," said Chrissy. "I'm his superior and ruler before anything else. If he wasn't so defiant, I wouldn't have to keep doing things like that."

"Wh...what?" Ramona mumbled.

"I'm doing this *my* way," said Andrew. "If you've got a problem with that, I don't know what to tell ya."

"The only reason you're even here is because of me," said Chrissy. "And I can change that *really quickly* if you're so set on doing things your way. Remember that."

Andrew frowned, hissing through his clenched teeth, "Sorry."

"Now be a good boy and do as is requested of you," said Chrissy. "You must understand that you work under MAE and you are to do whatever I say. Are you going to cooperate?"

Andrew gave a quick glance at Neva and Ramona before focusing his attention back on Daisy. "Yes."

"Excellent," Chrissy replied, much more pleasant in tone. "Your objective is right in front of you. Bring order to the world; execute the Kruna Yura."

Chapter XXXII

Shades of Purple:

The other Kruna Yura split and scattered along the streets, leaving ample room for Daisy and Andrew's clash to take place. Similarly, Commander Sindograss propelled herself over the area on her Spear bike and maintained a still hover through the bike's special anti-gravity systems. Now, whatever happened next was up to the Kruna Yura of Earth and the Kruna Yura of Shadow.

"I'm just gonna beat you now and worry about restoring your memory later," said Daisy. "That girl up there on the bike has got to go – and I don't mean she needs to leave."

"You're not laying a finger on her, so you can forget about that," Andrew said.

Daisy pulled up out of her stance in confusion. "What? You're seriously gonna protect her after what she just did to you?"

Andrew looked like he started to say something, but he ended up not responding. His demeanor deteriorated into a distressed mess for a split second before flaring into fiery fury. "Never mind her!" he yelled. "It's just you and me right now. And then, your friends are next after I beat you."

Daisy sighed and rolled her eyes. "You know, you don't fit the villain role very well, do you?"

"That's because *you're* the villains, and I'm the enforcer," Andrew said, pulsing dark power into his right arm.

"A good enforcer would force them all to their knees," said Chrissy. "Depending on how good you do, I might treat you to a reward."

"What is he to you, some pet?" Bowser snapped.

"He will do as I say, because I am his boss!" Chrissy shouted.

"Execute Wolf Rush!"

Andrew grimaced and crouched into a power stance, his shadows now expanding into a wild and aggressively flowing aura around him. His mass of shadow power amplified in mere moments into an audible upwards whirl of sharp, dark purple and black as he got set to leap. When he made his move ahead at Daisy, the jump came with speed and force across the entirety of the distance separating them. His outstretched, clawed right palm extended the reach of the barreling shadow aura, but it soon closed back towards his body to set up a shoulder bash once he got just outside of striking distance. Despite little time to react, Daisy threw her arms up from way down low as Andrew neared her. Through the upswing of her fists, she countered with an offsetting amount of force sufficient to result in both of them getting knocked back. Neither one of them went to the ground, for they both stopped themselves on their hands out of recoiled twists.

Andrew smirked as his shadows subsided. "Resisting won't do you any good. You're just wasting your effort."

"Who's wasting their effort?" said Daisy. "You're the one that charged up the big attack that got nowhere."

"I've never seen him do an attack like that before..." mumbled Ramona.

"Daisy, just transform and end this before it gets a chance to develop into anything else," said Bowser. "Don't act like we have all night."

Daisy rolled her eyes as she stood up and crossed her wrists. "For what? I don't need to transform to beat him. Come on."

"Transform?" Andrew mumbled, confused. "Oh, that's right. I heard about that trick you can do."

"You should know of it," said Daisy. "And it's no trick. You've seen it first hand. Both of you have."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Chrissy. "We know well of your

physiological metamorphosis. And we've had ample time to study it."

Daisy frowned. "How? What could you study in a week? I bet you don't even know half of what I can really do."

"Your 'Nova Form' has been in our files for some time," said Chrissy. "I believe since last autumn."

Daisy's frown tightened up. *But that was when I first transformed to begin with,* she thought. *How long have these guys actually been watching us?...*

Chrissy pressed a series of buttons on one of her gauntlets to pull up a small, miniature hologram with charts, percentages, and a virtual recreation of Daisy in her Nova Form. "You serve as the lone living example of such a technique. Of course you would be extensively studied in the months that we've had such information."

"Picky with your data, I'd say," commented Athelstan. "If that's the case, then you also have proof against your thinking of Andrew being the most powerful wielder on the planet!"

Chrissy made a subtle, non-blinking smile. "We know everything that we need to, and we're in the process of figuring out the rest. There's a reason why Joey is special, and why he's not the 'Andrew' you think he is... It is a most impressive ability, your Nova Form, Sarasa. The ability to consciously induce a series of changes within your body that can promote such statistically significant positive adaptations across the board can not be understated in any rational way. However, the most recently updated data suggests that there is no cause for concern. It is nothing Joey can not handle."

"I wouldn't sound so sure if I were you," said Daisy. "You wanna go off what some fancy data can tell you, go ahead."

Chrissy dismissed the projection from her gauntlet, her still smiling stare now focusing on Daisy while Andrew flared up more shadow power. "I suppose I should be a little worried. You barbarians can be quite unpredictable. But in the end, you're all just flesh and bone like the rest of us. You're not anywhere near invincible. It's time you get it through your stubborn heads that your kind can't just walk around

this world doing whatever you want. Joey, if you would please continue demonstrating your capacities?"

Before Andrew could finish preparing his next technique, Daisy rushed at him and flung a knee up high. He caught her blow in his hands, though it pushed him back and disrupted his gathered power. Through extending her lower leg, she flicked him further away. While he stumbled, she launched herself at him with an ax kick positioned to strike. Because of some quick evasive movement on Andrew's part however, Daisy ended up jamming her foot down on the Route M-45 asphalt.

"Is that the best you can do?" said Andrew. He folded his arms and turned his nose up and away. "I can't believe you actually thought I was a part of your team. *And* you had the nerve to act like you're better than me?"

"Well, I am," said Daisy. "Really, it's not even close. I don't know what she's over there going on about, nor do I actually care."

"Comical," Andrew murmured. "It's alright that you didn't know, and that you still don't know; but now, I'm gonna show you."

Andrew pulled back a fist way behind him and up, dark wisps sparking all around his wrist and fingers as rounded shadows pulsated out from his palm. His raised, charging arm tremored noticeably in the short time it took for him to prepare his attack.

"Here we go!" Andrew shouted through a grin. "Now, you'll see what true power is, SHADOW STRIKER STYLE!"

"HAH! Lame!" Neva screamed. "That totally didn't sound cool or anything!"

"Neva, hush," Ramona whispered.

"Oh, why am I surprised," Neva hissed. "Of course *you'll* try and defend him. You little kiss-up. What's your deal?"

Ramona said nothing more. She redirected her gaze back on Andrew, her demeanor now a little more uneasy. At about the same time Andrew seemingly rode his shadowed fist towards Daisy out of

the dive he made, Daisy readied what would have been a Breaker Punch. But when her downward-angled fist met his uppercut, both attacks canceled each other out. Her seismic power also clashed and dissipated with his darkness.

"Any special name for that one?" Daisy asked, executing a Breaker Punch with her opposite arm.

"Raven Boost," Andrew replied, repeating his attack with his other arm. Again, both fists clanked in more or less the same fashion. The extra power Daisy thought she put behind her Breaker Punch got buffered from the excess Andrew had produced. As the first to act out of the shock the second clash gave off, Daisy ducked and swept one of her legs under Andrew to take his out from under him. But as she did that, Andrew raised an arm with a quick-charge of darkness around his hand. So even though Daisy made Andrew lose his footing, he still attacked immediately afterwards with a hammer swing of his charged hand. But despite his attack itself not being interrupted, he still missed Daisy through the loss of his aim. Right when he crashed onto the ground, Daisy grabbed him, made a twirling jump, and catapulted him out of her spin at an angle into the pavement. Andrew came to a haphazard rest after a hard, awkward two bounces on the highway road left him momentarily disoriented.

"I'm confused – isn't that Breaker Punch supposed to be unblockable?" asked Athelstan.

"Unblockable is one thing," said Bowser. "Andrew wasn't defending."

"Daisy, you better rip that guy's head off and kick it down onto the streets!" Neva shouted.

Daisy felt a perturbed grin form on her face after hearing Neva. "Okay, well, I don't know about going *that* far..."

Andrew took less than a second to ready and release another Raven Boost, only for Daisy to stomp some seismic power through the highway to divert his leaping dive. His side slid onto the asphalt, and he popped up out of the momentum through a roll and a flip to quickly return to a standing position. Neva, Marut, and Ramona had also lost their balance and swayed some because of Daisy's stomp.

A few hard cracks and creaks echoed across the Twilight City air, seemingly originating from their immediate area.

"Hey! Be a little more careful with that!" Bowser snapped at Daisy. "Otherwise, we'll *all* come crashing down, and likely on top of some unlucky people too!"

"Yes, much of these elevated roadways still have to be renovated and updated," said Chrissy. "But it is in your nature to cause mayhem, so I shouldn't expect anything short of carelessness."

"You shut up over there!" Neva screamed.

Andrew's right hand tightened and twitched several times in rapid succession before pumping out an immensely dense shadow burst at Daisy, who flipped and kicked the blast upward. Just as her sight readjusted out of her flip, she saw Andrew accelerate and bash into her with Wolf Rush. The contact propelled Daisy across the highway with great horizontal speed, almost planting her into the side of a passing car. Daisy had the pleasure of listening to the driver honk his horn as she hurried to her feet, but she had no time to get annoyed at him. Andrew closed in quick and connected with a Raven Boost that he then chained into a Raven Upper with his opposite arm, jumping and creating a multi-hit trail of shadow from his rising fist.

Launched skyward and on a trajectory that would have her taking a long drop to the city streets, Daisy whipped her body into a swift spin and jerked herself out of the momentum. She made a safe landing on the highway, but with next to no room between her and the guardrails behind her. Her reward for not falling off: the sight of Andrew clutching his right wrist and coalescing a massive amount of dark energy and shadows in his right palm. The bladed, spiky wisps of black and purple flickering like lightning from his hand made up the sole familiar technique of Andrew that he had used so far that night, his Shadow Ripper.

"Ha!" Daisy called out. "Certified, undeniable Andrew attack right there! Just try and say you're not him now!"

"I'm not him!" Andrew yelled. The activity surrounding and within his

Shadow Ripper escalated up to a point double that of its original state.

Bowser gasped, a nervous sweat forming on his head. "What just happened to his Shadow Ripper?!"

"It sounds like a whirlwind turned inside out," said Athelstan.

"Or some of those spatial pulsating sound effects in the movies," said Marut. "Aw man, I should've brought a recorder! These would've been awesome sounds for a video game!"

"Hey, moron of dirt!" Neva yelled at Daisy. "Get over there and attack him while he's readying that move! He's defenseless!"

Daisy hesitated to respond, the ends of her open mouth curling up a little. "Uh...no..."

"WHY NOT?!" hollered Neva, drawing Andrew's attention.

"Because I wanna see what he can do," said Daisy. "That move looks pretty impressive, way more impressive than what I remember of it."

"YOU BIG DUMMY!" Neva screamed. "WHO CARES WHAT HE CAN DO?! JUST HURRY UP AND BEAT HIS GUTS OUT!"

"I take it you're actually over him for real, then," said Bowser.

"Screw this jerk! I don't want anything to do with him!" Neva snapped. "If he can't remember me, then I don't need him in my life!"

Andrew let go of the wrist harboring his technique as the erratic darkness continued emitting surreal noise. "Shadow Ripper: A Hundred Shades!"

The whole time Andrew had prepared his attack, Daisy had pulled earth from below and gathered it into a rotating ring around her. Andrew bent over into a three-point stance, an explosive dash at his target imminent. Daisy lowered herself into a power stance, ready to react with her collected dirt, soil, and even a limited amount of humus and mulch.

"Huh...somebody must've just planted something nearby," mumbled Daisy. "Hope they don't mind me borrowing some matter, not like I can be picky in a place like this!"

Andrew swayed forward with minimal speed, but then bolted off of his spot in a frantic haste. The quickness with which he moved offered Daisy little time to act. Despite that, Daisy showed off yet another incredible feat of both physical prowess and cognitive acuity. The instant before Andrew reached her, Daisy dropped all control over her accumulated earth and zipped to her left. Andrew thrust his upgraded Shadow Ripper into nothing but the now inanimate earth that had yet to fall to the pavement. Putting on a hard brake to her momentum, Daisy spun and swung an upturned palm up and across her body. All of the earth she had just dropped then lifted and slammed Andrew from underneath. The combined vertical push and preserved horizontal speed Andrew still carried sent him off the highway, a hard landing awaiting him at the end of his descent.

"Oops!" Daisy squealed, anxiously smiling. "Should I have done that?"

Bowser stared at her with a raised eyebrow. "Not exactly ideal..."

"How high up are we, again?" asked Marut.

"Good!" Neva said, grinning. "Now do the same thing to the MAE girl!"

Coincidentally, Chrissy was nowhere to be found. The Kruna did not see her anywhere they looked on the highway until she came flying back up from below with her hands on one of Andrew's wrists and her Hover Boots active. Rather than set her partner safely onto the highway asphalt and make sure that he was okay, Chrissy released her hold on him several feet above the road and let him drop onto his rear end. It almost looked like she may have even lobbed him a very slight amount before letting him go. The MAE commander then flew back to her hovering bike and sat on it with care.

"That was a foolish maneuver, Joey," Chrissy said. "Why would you make such a move *that* close to the edge?"

Andrew shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't think she would do that."

Chrissy grumbled. "Get up and fight! And be more cautious! Things would've turned out differently if you didn't have so much hang time."

"And I'm glad you're okay too," Athelstan mumbled.

"I'm not," Neva muttered.

"Hey, Chrissy," Marut said. "Weren't you already on your bike? Why didn't you just fly down with that instead of those boots?"

"I can accelerate quicker with my Hover Boots," said Chrissy.

"Then what's the point of having that bike?" asked Bowser.

"The bike has more top speed and can go further!" Chrissy barked.

"Why doesn't your bike have more accel in the first place though?" asked Marut.

"Because it's based on a Spear bike!" Chrissy shouted.

Bowser gave a haughty laugh. "You mean to tell me that with all the advanced tech you guys make, you couldn't give that bike extra horsepower?"

"I didn't ask for your review, Consumer Monthly!" yelled Chrissy.

"So much for improving everything," said Bowser.

"Oh, so anti-gravity is not good enough for you, huh?!" Chrissy screamed.

"Who said that?" Bowser replied. "It's just funny that you're on a flying bike, and you got off of your bike to use your flying boots to fly down instead of just flying with your bike."

"Wow, that does sound kinda redundant," said Athelstan.

"Brain-dead tech head!" Neva taunted.

Chrissy narrowed her eyes at the Kruna in a hateful stare. "Jaguar

Lash, Joey."

Andrew scowled. "You don't need to tell me which move to use."

"Don't argue with me," said Chrissy.

"Don't tell me which move to use," Andrew said. "But since you brought it up, you better not give me lip if she survives it."

"Talk like that to other MAE personnel," said Chrissy. "Don't speak that way to me."

For the first time all battle, Andrew took out the Lunar Broadsword he had strapped to his back. Held upside-down in his left hand, the short but thick sword seemed more blunt than sharp. Though it had some similarities in appearance to the Kruna Yura's Volt Fusion tools, there was no telling what special properties Andrew's Lunar Broadsword could boast.

"That is some super shiny black," said Marut.

In response to the accumulating darkness around Andrew's sword, Daisy put a hand on her Laser Drill Staff. Without taking it off of its back holster, Daisy channeled some seismic power into it. The shadows around Andrew's sword took on the shape of flaming talons.

" *Another* new move?" said Athelstan. "Man, what's up?!"

"Maybe that's where he's been this whole time," said Marut. "Off learning more moves and stuff."

"Where?" Bowser asked.

"Somewhere," Marut replied. "Maybe it's top-secret, highly-classified where he went because he found shadow masters that don't want to be a part of society."

"Unlikely, at best," said Bowser.

"Okay, well, maybe he met with his cousin again, and she taught him more stuff," said Marut.

Andrew's body gained a thin outline of pure black that faded into an outer shell of white, and the shadows around his sword hardened into streamlined waves hugging the blade. He bent at his hips and knees, positioning his sword behind him and low. A handful of cars impatiently pushed through the scene and around the Kruna there, a few of them blasting their horns on their way by.

Chrissy tapped a few buttons on one of her gauntlets and raised it to her mouth. "Jorge, this is Commander Sindograss. Set up a detour off of M-45 northbound and southbound to close through traffic in the central sector where M-45 meets M-36, thanks."

"Whenever you're ready, Andrew," Daisy said.

Andrew smiled. "Noted."

The next instant, Andrew moved at Daisy with the streak of his outline trailing behind him. He hopped and leapt in a non-straight pattern, closing distance but bouncing from left to right on his way. Daisy felt unsure over whether she could dead-on counter whatever he was coming at her with, so she decided to try matching him. When Andrew made the final lunge at her, he got his whole body-involved in the reverse-gripped sword swing that pulled from up high down across him in a sweeping, shadow-swiping slash with exceptional velocity and force. But with the Iaido staff swing Daisy flipped out at his sword strike, he failed to exact any harm. Both of their attacks clanked off one another and sent them both off-balance, Daisy veering to her left and Andrew stumbling to his left. Andrew spun off of the recoil and tried a second, more animated swing, only to catch nothing but air. He nearly flopped onto the asphalt but held himself up just long enough for Daisy to roll behind him and smack her staff on his back to put him down anyways.

"Was that the Jaguar Lash Chrissy wanted?" Daisy asked. "It didn't work. Try again."

Daisy then did her best golf impression and slapped Andrew across the highway through the use of her staff. After she had scooped him into the air, he then endured a less than graceful landing near the overpass of the highway crossing over the one they were currently on. Grumbling and grunting as he got up, Andrew looked at Daisy

and saw her wave at him.

"You're pretty good, countering *that* ," said Andrew. "I didn't want to fight any more than I had to; but, I'm glad I'm not sitting here daydreaming."

Daisy again smiled, replacing her staff in its holster. "Like I said – MAE should've tried to recruit me, if they were looking for the most powerful wielder."

Andrew gave a small laugh, putting his sword away. "Alright; chill out, before you get ahead of yourself."

"Hey, Ramona," said Bowser. "Are you doing okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I think," mumbled Ramona.

"Are you sure?" asked Bowser. "You've been fairly calm and quiet through all of this."

Ramona made some sort of cryptic, anxious sound with her throat in response, but she did not say anything. She kept staring at Andrew, her expression blank and lost.

"I will give you this though," said Daisy. "You're a helluva lot more powerful compared to the last time I saw you."

"I don't know how many times I have to say I'm not that 'Andrew' guy you're so convinced I am," Andrew responded. "But I have been working on improving my power a little in the past few months, so maybe you're not entirely wrong. Mostly, you are."

"Regardless, that's still a lot of power you developed in the span of just a few months," said Daisy.

"It's a leap year," Andrew said, allowing his shadow power to build around him once more. He marched toward Daisy with slow, deliberate steps, stopping only a short distance in front of her. The two of them stood in a diagonal across from one another in relation to the two roads of M-45, one to each side of the highway.

"Bowser, what's your impression so far from this?" Athelstan asked.

"I don't know how either one of them will make any progress on the other," said Bowser. "They're both almost the same person; just all out on the offense, heavy on the strength, speed, power, all of that. From what I recall, where Andrew's got the strength and power edge, Daisy has more speed and agility. And she's not as reckless. Of course, Nova Form would change that, but I don't think she has any intention of transforming against him."

"So it's whoever makes the most mistakes then," Marut said under his breath.

"Which should be Andrew, if this were any other time," said Bowser. "And so far, he has been doing plenty for Daisy to capitalize off of. But...he seems significantly more powerful than before."

"Yeah, but so does Daisy," said Athelstan. A few moments later, he frowned and scratched his head. "Actually...does Shady's energy itself seem kind of...strange?"

"I dunno – does it?" said Marut.

"That's why I'm asking," Athelstan said. "I can't pinpoint what it is, but...it's not quite right. Some detail somewhere feels off. It's really bugging me."

"Hard to tell," said Bowser. "That might just be a product of him being more powerful than we remember. What I can say I've noticed is that he's been heavily reliant on augmenting his physicality with his elemental power. That alone is enough to worry somebody, if you're not ready for it."

"You know what," Andrew said to Daisy. "You actually are starting to seem kind of familiar now. How, I don't know. But I know I gotta tighten up and take you a little more seriously now."

Daisy said nothing in response, her expression turning intensely solemn. While Andrew powered up, she stood her ground and watched him. Her attention went to his energy signature as it spiked and increased in magnitude. She could feel the inner third eye that Geno had helped her to develop activate through her dedicated, deliberate concentration on Andrew's energy signature. After some

careful focus on Andrew, Daisy could tell what Athelstan had meant. Andrew did feel strange. It was almost as if his energy signature had no real flow, and it was instead just a collection of pulsating power rather than a clean circuit. This inner disorder did not reflect on the outside, for the energy flow Andrew had projected outward resembled a constant, consistent loop up and through his body much like that of any other shadow wielder or elemental wielder in general.

In fact, both Chrissy's and Andrew's energy signatures seemed similar in their oddities. That was in addition to how surprisingly prominent Chrissy's felt, for a non-wielder. Through her third eye's ethereal sight, Daisy could see the energy emanating from both Chrissy and Andrew. Chrissy's and Andrew's energies appeared as amorphous, jagged, popping blobs void of order and without any clear general direction of flow. Such a strange occurrence in Chrissy may not have been noticeable before, because the Kruna had initially acknowledged her energy signature as a new, previously unknown one. They knew Andrew's well enough however, which meant that they had a reference for comparison; and neither of the two there in front of Daisy matched up with said reference.

Every living being with an energy signature has their energy flow in a chain, Daisy said in thought. *Even if there's something wrong with their energy, there's still some form of...looping system throughout the body. Neither of these two have anything even close to that. There's no organization. It's just a mass... When Andrew's pushing power out from his body,* then *it flows like it should. But inside, it's going nowhere; or rather, it's going* anywhere *it can...*

With the insight her third eye provided her, Daisy could confirm that Athelstan had reason to wonder if there was something wrong with Andrew's energy signature. Perhaps even more bizarre, Chrissy's signature shared qualities with Warra's despite the lack of structure hers had. Just to make sure she was not seeing things, Daisy gave each of her teammates a quick glance through her third eye and saw no issues with their energies. Perplexed concern took over Daisy's face when she looked back ahead at Chrissy and Andrew.

Chapter XXXIII

Shades of Black:

Andrew – or Joey, as Chrissy had continuously called him that night – maintained his uprising of shadows around him, all while Daisy apparently zoned out. The two of them both stared at one another across opposite roads of Twilight City's elevated Route M-45 highway, but Daisy's gaze seemed unfocused on the physical world. As if he was about to say something, Andrew opened his mouth, only to close it a few seconds later and go back to building up his power. The sudden uptick in energy he gave off seemed to jar Daisy out of her vacant stare, and she regained her alertness.

"What is with her?" Neva groaned. "Why'd she look at us like that? She's just letting him do anything he wants! Isn't she supposed to be attack-heavy?"

"Whatever's wrong with Andrew, we do need to get a move on here," said Athelstan. "We've got something we need to do, and this is eating up copious amounts of time."

"Daisy, hurry up!" Neva hollered. "Beat his head in already and let's go!"

"That's still our friend there," said Bowser. "We're not just fighting another MAE operative-"

"He ain't no friend of mine!" Neva yelled. "Not anymore! Nope! I say we all just gang up on them! It's six against two – we can knock them both off of this highway and let 'em splat on top of somebody's car!"

"Chrissy has those shoes that hover though," said Marut.

"Break her ankles!" snapped Neva.

Chrissy flinched at the sound of such a proposition, her body language turning timid. Daisy abruptly perked up, though not

because of any of Neva's remarks. She had noticed Andrew's stare break off from her and move elsewhere.

"What are you lookin' at?!" Neva shouted at Andrew.

"You!" Andrew replied.

"Well don't!" yelled Neva.

Andrew scowled at Neva before putting his focus back on himself and Daisy. That agitation Neva provided added to Andrew's rising power. Chrissy sat on her hovering Spear bike and fiddled with the screen on her left gauntlet while Andrew powered up, her built-in computer giving her a photographic and statistical side-by-side comparison of he and Daisy.

"The fact that you're taking this long is pretty telling," Daisy said to Andrew. "Either you've really got a lot of power to build up, or you're hesitating and don't know what to do for your next move."

Andrew said nothing. His expression appeared indecisive. From what Daisy could sense, his power had stopped rising and reached a plateau.

A few moments later, Chrissy giggled to herself. Daisy gave the MAE commander-in-chief a look full of suspicion, which turned into total alarm when her inner third eye saw Andrew's energy signature fade from his body. Not much longer afterward, Daisy's actual eyes then saw Andrew's aura and body fade away into the ether.

Illusion! Daisy yelled in thought.

"Too slow!" Andrew barked right behind her.

On instinct, Daisy dove out in front of her and just narrowly escaped a pounding from the shadow-charged two-handed smash Andrew slammed down. Rolling onto a foot and a knee, the Kruna of Earth then saw her shadow counterpart rush at her with a flurry of punches and kicks. Forced onto the defensive, Daisy dodged and blocked each and every strike as it came. But as time went on, the rate at which his offensive operated increased. In a sudden twist, Andrew cut off the rapid release of melee attacks and slung four

shadow bursts at her. Where all his punches and kicks failed, three of his four blasts connected for damage.

Andrew pulled back and thrust a heavy punch, only for Daisy to match with a punch of her own. Aerial distortion and audible cracking popped out of the impact their knuckles made, and both wielders felt the shock travel up through their arms. Such a hard mutual transfer momentarily prevented both of them from attempting another attack, but the pause did not last long.

Daisy struck first, now entering her own furious chain of punches and kicks. But unlike Andrew, Daisy landed most of her hits. A couple dozen connections ended with an upswing of her fists to knock Andrew into the air, and a jumping double palm strike smashed him back onto the hard highway road. To Andrew's credit, he bounced out of the impact with the floor and went right back on the attack. The moment he got his feet set, he crossed his hands and raised his arms with a mass of darkness pouring out of his palms. Upon landing, Daisy pulled all the abandoned earth together that she brought up from earlier. Opting for a quick attack, Daisy launched her earth at Andrew in a column and smacked him out of his charge.

Daisy put together as much crystal as she could in as little time as possible while she ran at Andrew. As he skidded along the highway, Daisy leapt and struck her Crystal Kick onto his chest. Following the special move that, for the moment, left Andrew too dazed to respond in turn, Daisy jumped away from him and ceased further attack.

It took Andrew a while to get back up, and he did not look as strong as he did beforehand. After that combo Daisy put together, all of the Kruna braced for a massive retaliation from Andrew. Instead, he eased up on his stance and gave Daisy a thumbs up.

"Hey, not bad," Andrew said, a faint smile showing. "Pretty sick moves!"

"I should be saying that to you!" Daisy replied.

"I'm just trying to be as good as I can be," said Andrew. "Somehow, it's not working... How'd *you* get so good?"

"The same way you did!" said Daisy. "You should know; you were there!"

Andrew paused, pondering her remark. "Was I?" he murmured.

"Joey, what are you doing?" Chrissy hissed. "You have one job, and that's to kill them. Don't pay any mind to what she says!"

Andrew's smile warped into a half-grin, half-frown. "Sorry. You're right."

"No, she's not right!" Daisy said. "Why do you even listen to her? She's just using you!"

"I'm not, Joey," said Chrissy. "Remember your purpose."

"What purpose?" Daisy shot back. "What *you* said his purpose is? I can tell you right now that he's no wielder hunter." She glanced back at Andrew. "Come on, dude – who're ya gonna believe?"

"I have the power to end you in a heartbeat," Chrissy said to Andrew. "Do as I have ordered you, Joey. Eliminate them!"

Andrew's expression turned lost and anxious. He then looked at all the other five Kruna further away and spectating. Daisy could sense strain and confusion coming from the shadow wielder.

On the other hand, Neva noticed Andrew looking at her and turned red. "What do you keep staring at me for?!" she yelled.

Andrew flinched. "Who said I was staring at you? Why would I want to stare at you? You're already an idiot; don't be a little creep too!"

"Then don't creep at me like that!" Neva shouted. "You're calling *me* a creep?!"

"You're the one that kept trying to come on to me earlier!" Andrew snapped. "Just shut up!"

"You shut up!" screamed Neva. "Don't talk to me!"

"I can not believe you put up with her," Andrew hissed at Daisy.

"She's really not that bad," said Daisy. "I think she just misses you."

Andrew blushed, letting his gaze drift towards Neva. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're doing it again – cut it out!" Neva barked.

"I'm not doing anything!" responded Andrew.

"YES YOU ARE!" Neva cried. "Stop looking at me! Go ogle your new girlfriend!"

Andrew grunted and pointed his finger at Neva. "Listen, kids' meal; you better not make me come over there!"

"Or what?" Neva replied. "Come on, then! I'm right here!"

"Ohhhh-kay – now I'm really getting fed up with you people," Andrew said. Diving into angry hostility, he once more flared shadows around him.

"He's got no quit in him," commented Bowser. "I'll give him that."

"But it looks like Daisy really hurt him," mumbled Ramona.

Andrew crossed his wrists in front of his chest, his palms facing himself. He looked about as mad as Neva did at that moment, though he kept his anger more subdued. Despite his emotional state, the darkness he had generated slowed in flow speed and compressed. His shadow aura soon only resembled a thin sheet of power, compared to usual.

"Now what are you up to?" Daisy asked. "You just keep coming up with surprises, huh?"

Andrew gave her no reply – not right away, at least. A stark, unsettling change came on in the form of a shift in his dark aura. Instead of the blend of black and purple it usually had, his darkness turned completely, entirely black. And somehow, the blackness itself turned darker. This was apparent even with the current nighttime environment and the relatively moderate street lighting and low ambient lighting throughout Twilight City. The shadows that migrated

and collected predominantly around Andrew's hands drowned out his skin with no transparency or translucence anywhere. Even the white of his shirt disappeared behind the total black void.

"That's...remarkable," said Bowser. "Not only the amount of power, but the control he's exhibiting... I don't know how, but he has significantly improved since our fight against Marissa."

"Why wasn't he doing all of this stuff *when* we were fighting Marissa?" asked Athelstan.

"Better question rather, where has he been all this time to progress this much?" said Bowser.

"The darkest of darkness will bring you to justice," Andrew murmured at Daisy. "Vantablack will end this . "

" *Vantablack?!* " said Ramona. "What is that? He's never done that before!"

"It looks like someone smudged his hands with a paint program on a computer," said Marut.

"This really didn't need to drag on for so long," Andrew said with the cockiest of smiles. "All of this nonsense should've been over by now! You guys watching, pay close attention; 'cause *you're* all gonna have to deal with this one next!"

The Vantablack pumped up into a mostly static cloud of opaque darkness stretching across the width of Andrew's shoulders and down to his lower abdomen. His shadows were so dark, no one could tell how far out in front of him his shadows reached; neither the Kruna nor Chrissy could. From Chrissy's point of view behind him, Andrew's darkness blocked out the view of a few of the Kruna.

"This is the ultimate technique," Andrew declared. "Shadow wielder or otherwise."

Daisy shrugged. "It's just black. I mean, literally. It's just a mass of black. I could probably wave my clothes around, and it'd be the same thing."

"Oh, trust me," said Andrew. "What I have here is nothing even close to that matte earth wielder black. You're not dealing with average, everyday darkness now."

"What is it then?" said Athelstan. "Advanced darkness?"

"YES!" shouted Andrew.

The next thing Daisy knew, she was rolling along the highway into the guardrail siding after a shadow burst hit her. She had no idea how she could have gotten hit, for she had failed to see any attack come at her. In Daisy's field of vision, it looked like Andrew's shadow power had expanded and grown but had not been launched. As she picked herself up, Daisy still saw the total darkness of Andrew's Vantablack obscuring his torso.

"Ugh...what even hit me?" Daisy grumbled. "Was that some sort of illusion?"

"Daisy! How'd you just stand there and take that?!" shouted Neva.

"Take what?" asked Marut. "I didn't see what hit her."

"I didn't see anything either," said Bowser. " *I* didn't see anything."

"How could you not see it?" asked Athelstan. "How often do straight columns of total blackness shoot through the air?"

"Ramona, did you see anything?" Bowser asked.

Ramona shook her head. "All I saw was a big, black cloud."

"Did it hit her?" Marut wondered. "I saw it move some, but I didn't think it hit her."

Chrissy giggled and clapped her hands. "That's a fine technique you have there, Joey. I don't know what happened, but you obviously have a handle on things. Very well done."

" *You* don't even know?" Bowser asked.

"I've never seen him use this move before," said Chrissy.

Daisy felt another burst smash her into the rail behind her, yet she again failed to detect anything through sight alone. In both instances, she just saw an expansion of black. The two hits stacked together took considerable chunks of vitality out of Daisy.

"Now tell me you guys didn't see that one!" said Neva.

"I didn't see that one," said Bowser.

"I *kinda* saw that one...?" Marut said.

"Man, you guys should get your eyes checked," said Athelstan.

Bowser scowled. "I'm the one here with the enhanced sight, and *I* need to get my eyes checked?"

"You see Daisy on the ground?" asked Neva. "We saw her get hit, you guys didn't. What's up there?"

"Are we looking at it the wrong way?" asked Marut.

Daisy scrambled to her feet and hurried across the highway streets, anticipating a third unseen blast. She heard the clash of energy with metal and asphalt behind her, which told her that Andrew did indeed get off a third burst at where she previously was. Andrew put out a fourth and fifth Vantablack blast as Daisy ran across the middle of the two M-45 roads, one zooming through the air and hitting the gap between Ramona and Bowser. The fifth burst sailed over Marut's head on his right. Ramona saw a wall of blackness rush past her right, Bowser's eyes also catching it as well as it blew past his left *and* also stayed in his Kracielle-enhanced vision as it soared behind him. But to both of them, they could not tell how much distance the blackness had covered. Neva and Athelstan had trouble spotting and tracking the blast that went past Marut.

"I'm not sure what just happened there," Athelstan said. "It looked like that black grew, flashed on my left, and disappeared."

"Okay, I think I see what you guys mean," said Neva, a blast sailing by directly over her.

"You mean you don't see," said Bowser. "But we saw the one that

went through on your side."

Daisy cut back towards the middle as Andrew launched a seventh blast. Confidently, Andrew taunted, "Gonna keep running?"

"Nope!" Daisy replied, changing direction again and running straight at him. The attack she had in mind to execute failed before she even started it, for blackness expanded into her vision and knocked her away once more.

"There's a definite optical issue here," said Bowser.

"It's like, you can see it from the side, but you can't see it when it's coming at you," said Marut.

"Yeah, how do you get depth perception on that?" Athelstan asked.

"You can't," said Bowser. "It's completely black. Solid black. It's like walking around in a cave with no light. You can't tell where anything is because everything in your eyes is black."

"Unless you're an earth or shadow wielder," said Athelstan.

"Well, it doesn't seem like that matters here," said Bowser. "Whatever's making Vantablack so dark is offsetting Daisy's night vision. Otherwise, she wouldn't have issues with seeing it coming."

"Then doesn't that mean Andrew can't see it leave when he blasts it?" said Marut.

"I don't like how unfair this is starting to seem," Andrew said to Daisy, who struggled to get back up. He let another Vantablack blast go and scored another hard-hitting strike. "But, I can't worry about fairness when it comes to helping out this world."

Andrew took extra time to charge the next Vantablack blast before firing it, also allowing whatever accumulated residual darkness still around Daisy the opportunity to dissipate so he could make sure he had a clear shot. Judging from Daisy's appearance, he anticipated the next all-encompassing Vantablack darkness burst he had on standby to be the finishing blow. But when he fired it, a golden glow flared around the shrinking darkness in his sight. A high-energy

clash sounded off, and Andrew did not see his mass of total blackness connect with his target or splatter against anything. Instead, the blackness swelled; and it swelled remarkably fast. Only when he felt the black column bash and smother him did he realize that his Vantablack had been reflected right back at him. All of a sudden, Chrissy's demeanor towards her downed partner turned scornful.

"What are you doing on your back?" Chrissy yelled. "To your feet! You had complete control, and you let them slam your attack back into your face? You didn't even try to get out of the way!"

Andrew stood up in total confusion. But everything made sense when he got a look at who was in front of Daisy. Ramona had stepped ahead of the Kruna of Earth and slashed a reflective light shield into place for defense. For after all, Vantablack was still more or less like most other attacks. Just because it proved difficult to see did not mean someone could not deflect it in any way.

Once done helping Daisy up, Ramona turned back to Andrew and set up in an unusually aggressive stance. Her sword up across her body and pointing out next to her ear, Ramona eyed Andrew with an air of undoubted decisiveness. She only flinched for a brief moment, when she saw Andrew in obvious pain following enduring his own reflected Vantablack blast.

"Ha! Ultimate technique my foot!" Neva yelled at Andrew. "I can do way better than that! Vantablack sucks!"

"Ramona, I didn't need you to protect me," said Daisy. "I was about to-"

"I will take over," said Ramona. "This is not your fight. I should've been facing him from the start. I can beat him, safely and easily."

"You...are you really sure?" Daisy asked.

Ramona nodded. "I'm sure... I'm confident."

"Now look," Chrissy hissed. "You failed to finish off Daisy – now they're going to start substituting! What's your answer to this?"

Andrew gritted his teeth, not looking at Chrissy. "Win this."

"You better win this, Joey!" Chrissy demanded, her expression grim. "You either win this, or you die. That simple. If they don't kill you, I will."

"Wha- why?" Andrew snapped.

"If you're not fit for your job, you don't deserve to live," Chrissy said. "Because in the end, you're just one of them. This is the only reason why you still have freedom. Don't you forget that."

"What freedom?" hissed Andrew. "You mean being a slave to you?"

"You're not behind bars or on death row, are you?" said Chrissy. "You should be thankful and willing to pledge your life to me and to all of MAE."

Andrew scowled. "I should've known – I can't trust anyone in this world. Some friend you are."

"I know, right?" said Chrissy. "The best friend you've ever had – for keeping you alive and out of prison with the rest of your kind."

"Geez, girl!" Daisy yelled. "Andrew's been helping you for however long, and you view him as some disposable tool? You need to lighten up and get your mind sorted out!"

" *You* need to stop getting in the way of MAE!" Chrissy shouted. "This pitiable uprising you Kruna have put together will get you nowhere! Andr- Joey! Ergh, now you've got me calling him that. Joey, I don't care if you gore and gut them or scatter them onto the sidewalk and streets below – just erase them from existence! I'm done tolerating these meddlesome pests! Kill them all!... Hey! Joey! Are you listening to me? Don't just stand there! I'm talking to you!"

"I-idiot..." Andrew grunted out, his gaze on Neva.

"You're the idiot!" Neva yelled. "I swear, if you don't stop looking at me-"

"I wouldn't be looking at you if you weren't looking at me!" Andrew

snapped. "You've got anything and everything else to stare at!"

"I kinda *have* to look at you, dummy!" shouted Neva. "You're the enemy, aren't you?"

"Why are you even still talking to me?!" Andrew yelled. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

All of a sudden, Neva's demeanor broke down into jittery nervousness. "Wha- why are *you*- uh- wh- it, jus- SHUT UP! I hate you! Remember? Die!"

"Alright, you little runt!" Andrew boomed. "I've had it up to..." As his voice trailed off, he smirked and crouched to get one of his hands just inches off of the ground. " *Here* , with you."

"Oh, okay, smartass!" Neva screamed. "You wanna go?! I'm not scared of you!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah?!"

"YEAH!"

"YEAH?!"

"YEEAAAAH!"

"Uh, Neva..." Daisy said.

Before Neva had even realized it, Andrew was standing directly in front of her. With his hands cupped on his elbows, he gave her a disapproving stare. Though not all at once, Neva calmed down from fiery hot boasting into shaking meekness.

"You were saying?" Andrew murmured.

"H-huh-" Neva stuttered. "Jus...j-just...ugh...ju- go ahead! Take your best shot! I'll, I'll tear you apart! Stupid shadow-breather! Touch me, and I'll kill you!"

"I swear, you are the most annoying person I have ever met!" Andrew shouted.

"Then do something about it already!" Neva shot back.

Neva braced herself for a retaliation, whether verbal or physical. But neither happened. Andrew gritted his teeth at her, but his angered expression degraded right in front of her. Not long passed before Neva shoved him away. Despite getting irked once more, he did nothing in response.

"What's your problem?" said Neva.

"Just...just..." Andrew stuttered, his face turning red as he looked away. "Nothing! I just couldn't stand being that close to an annoying little freak like you!"

Neva's eyes narrowed, and her fists tightened. Instead of Daisy fighting Andrew – or even Ramona fighting Andrew – the Kruna and Chrissy watched Neva unravel an icy blaze of punches all over the shadow wielder. She attacked with relentless abandon, not taking the time or grace to aim her swings. Andrew could not fight back. Neva had him completely overwhelmed. Before long, Neva forced him to the ground and sat on top of him while she slugged anywhere from his abdomen up to his forehead. Her knuckles getting bloodied and sore did nothing to slow her down. Only fatigue and loss of breath finally put an end to the hundreds of punches she laid on Andrew, but that was not quite enough for her. Shortly after she got off of him, Neva slammed four kicks in a row into his side that made him flip and roll like a log.

The other Kruna did not know what to be shocked more with; Neva's furious onslaught on Andrew, or what happened moments later. While Neva inhaled and huffed away her oxygen debt, Andrew's body jolted and vibrated on the road. Andrew's form itself then imploded, and his body fell apart into graphic chunks and pieces of limbs, innards, and other assorted organic structures. The mess that

now lie as the remnants of Andrew's body soon lost all animation. Out of everyone there, only Chrissy and Ramona seemed comparatively unfazed. Ramona appeared more alarmed with the sight itself, but Chrissy was just irate.

"Before anybody says anything, I swear I didn't try to do that!" Neva cried.

"Okay, g-good, because I don't needa be turning into that there," mumbled Marut.

"What kind of fancy illusion is this now?" asked Athelstan.

"It's no illusion," murmured Bowser. "I can smell it."

After the initial shock of the gory sight, Ramona stared at the pile made up of Andrew's body with indifference. Daisy glanced at Ramona to see how she was doing, only to be surprised with her muted emotion. They both spent little time pondering what had just happened, for the sound of Chrissy hovering high into the air on her Spear bike grabbed their attention.

"Where do you think you're going?" Daisy called out.

The MAE commander stared at the Kruna of Earth with utter hatred in her eyes. "If you somehow make it past Commander Sparrint, you will face *fire and brimstone* upon entering Evershade Valley."

" *Or* , you can stop running away and just fight us here," said Daisy. "You're the Head Commander, aren't you? Why prolong the inevitable? Just fight us now."

"I *will* fight you if *that's truly what it takes,* " Chrissy hissed. Sparing no further time, she sped away on her Spear through the Twilight City skies. Despite now having the ability to proceed further into the MAE-controlled metropolis and press on with their run towards Evershade Valley, the Kruna had one glaring problem holding them back in the form of a dear shadow wielder's remains abandoned on the M-45 highway.

The six Kruna Yura gathered around the pile, all of them numb, empty, confused, at a loss for words, and melancholic over such a

sudden turn of events. Raging and anger-driven minutes ago, Neva had nothing now but overwhelming emotional turmoil and tearful regret. Though Neva kept herself from breaking down, her distress was visible enough for Daisy to hug her and tell her, "It's not your fault, Neva."

"Does this mean he's dead?" asked Marut.

"You try having that happen to you and see how well you feel," said Bowser.

"Wow..." Athelstan said under his breath. "I can't believe this actually happened..."

"Well, good, or, whatever," mumbled Neva. "We don't need him. I sure don't."

Expected to be in the worst shape over it, Ramona still held up well. Her stoicism in the face of losing the best friend she had ever known radiated among the others and helped to keep the group stable and lessen the blow. Though probably more melancholic and distraught deep down than anyone there, Ramona did not let anyone know. She showed very little of her internal anguish, instead picking up Andrew's discarded sword and sheath and wrapping it across her back next to her own tool.

Daisy could not imagine what was going through Ramona's mind. For someone typically unstable and turbulent in Andrew's absence to not freak out and collapse into a wreck over what had happened, Ramona had come a long way. In fact, it took a simple, solemn phrase from Ramona to break the other five Kruna Yura out of their collective, foggy stupor.

"Let's go," Ramona said. When she gave the order and resumed their northward trek up the highway, everyone soon followed.

Chapter XXXIV

Gatehouse into Evershade Valley:

Battling through a less dense array of MAE robots, the Kruna Yura followed the M-45 highway northeastward and through several more intersections before coming up on what Neva pointed out as the route into District Square.

"We just need to get off of this exit ramp and stay on Park Avenue," said Neva. "Park Avenue ends right in the heart of District Square, which would put us in front of the city hall building. Unless they changed things up and remodeled, the road going past that building is the way into Evershade Valley."

The Kruna Yura took the next exit ramp to get back to ground level. Once off the highway, they worked their way through the city streets. The presence of the Kruna caused a stark decline in the amount of residents, citizens, and other people out and about. As the Kruna trekked up Park Avenue, MAE squadrons continued attacking them in earnest. Now also a part of the MAE squadrons, Heavy Troopa Remote Controlled Mobile Runners – tanks reminiscent in shape of thick Heavy Koopa Troopas – provided yet another challenge.

For as voluminous and deep as the MAE forces seemed, the Kruna's Volt Fusion tools gave them the edge they needed to survive and decimate each group they encountered. The Heavy Troopa RC-MRs proved to have more durability than the other mass-produced MAE creations, but their extra resistance and toughness still ultimately failed to stand up for long against the Kruna. The last MAE squadron the Kruna would face came at a few blocks before the end of Park Avenue. Now in District Square, the Kruna could see the city hall building for Twilight City dead ahead.

After a combination of lightning and magnetics with their elementals ripped through the remaining robots standing in their way, the Kruna proceeded towards city hall unhindered. They could give no mind to the trail of destroyed metal and trashed technology they left behind

them in the wake of their offensive into Twilight City. Clean up and explanations would have to wait until after MAE's defeat.

The general layout of District Square was slightly brighter and less dense compared to the rest of Twilight City, particularly in the area surrounding city hall. The end of Park Avenue fed into a square roundabout that had a flat, paved-over center. On the opposite side of where the Kruna approached the roundabout stood the eerily-lit city hall building in the back of a large, hilly yard fenced-off on all sides. To city hall's right and running alongside its fenced gate, a bright, wide cobblestone path illuminated with roadside lights led into an unknown darkness. The special road curled around and disappeared behind city hall, though the Kruna saw that the road had a tall, closed, MAE-decorated metal gate further down that both barred direct entry and stretched to the right all the way to the nearest building on that side. A large, glistening, sparkling banner over the gate at its point of entry read "Gatehouse Road."

Daisy placed a firm but soft hand on Neva's shoulder. "That's the way?"

Neva nodded. "That's it. But don't look now..."

Daisy and the other Kruna caught sight of what Neva had already seen. A figure marched from the building and across city hall's lawn, his form that of a large, wizened koopa in typical MAE commander getup. He was not as big as Bowser though, and his shell, sitting on the outside of his uniform, did not have spikes. However, he did have horns comparable to Bowser's, which curved around his hat and glasses and stretched longer. Combined with his silvery beard and mustache, his wide-beaked nose, and his clawed fingers, the MAE commander gave off an entirely different impression from his actual attitude.

From their spot near the center of the squared roundabout, the Kruna watched the MAE commander reach the edge of the street and stop. A pleasant look on his face, the MAE commander folded his arms behind his back and under his shell. He spoke with such gentleness and lack of angst, it almost seemed jarring to the Kruna. They could not detect any hint of malice or bitterness in his slow-paced, accented voice.

"Ah! Good evening!" the MAE commander said with a grin. "I am Commander Tacker Sparrint. You six are those Kruna Yura causing a commotion in Twilight City. I have seen your other exploits in Beanbean, Diamond City, Airebis, etcetera, etcetera."

"Oh," Daisy said, caught off guard by the commander's peaceful demeanor. "Uh...yeah, that was us."

Commander Sparrint nodded, maintaining his smile. "Quite impressive, the amount of trouble you have caused. You must truly be formidable warriors. The data on you does not lie. I think. Eh, I never cared much for data. A person's powers can fluctuate throughout the day too much. Especially when one powers up. There's no accurate way to get a true one hundred percent reading, because you can push past what should be your full capacity if you really know what you're doing and are that driven. Temporarily, you can, at least."

"How would you know that?" asked Bowser.

"I was an elemental wielder like you too," said Commander Sparrint. "Yes, I was a fine earth wielder. Top-tier in my town when I was your age. They called me 'The Titan of the Sub *terranean.* ' I represented the black and silver with pride, much like my sister was a force of the white and ice blue. But that was before I gave it all up... Now then, I think I have to destroy you now. Or so, that's what Commander Chrissy says. So, what I'm going to do is pull out the Father Mech, and- Actually, I really need to finish my tea; so I should go get that first, and *then* come back with the Father Mech. That way-"

"Wait, why'd you give up wielding?" Daisy asked.

Commander Sparrint shrugged in nonchalance. "Do you honestly care?"

"Actually, like, yeah?" Daisy said.

"Um, me too," said Ramona.

"I don't get why any wielder like what you say you were would wanna work for MAE," remarked Marut.

"Plenty of reason," said Bowser. "It seems like every one of The Learners has had a personal vendetta against wielders."

"Spot on, my fellow koopa," said Commander Sparrint. "Though, it was after I saw my younger sister go rogue and start using her ice powers for crimes and sinful practices that I began to realize the dangers of wielding."

"Oh, your sister..." murmured Ramona. "I'm so sorry to hear."

"No, no; it's okay," said Commander Sparrint, waving her off. "I only loved my sister more than anything in the world. I just lost my best friend, that's all. It's nothing important."

"Is that sarcasm?" asked Marut.

"Pfft – of course it is," said Commander Sparrint. "You can be as sorry as you want. What's already done is done. My sister as I once knew her no longer exists. She was such a sweet and kind, amiable person with everything she could have wanted in life. One of the best, most genuine types of people you could have around. But she became so powerful over time, that she turned corrupt. She started thinking she was better than others, and that she was more important because of her abilities. She turned greedy and power-hungry. She went bad. It all got to her head. And the worst part? She was never satisfied."

Commander Sparrint paused very briefly, scratching at his beard and looking to the sky. "She still isn't. I think she busted out of jail for, like, the fourth or fifth time last month. You see? Your powers can and will turn you into monsters. If they haven't already, it's only a matter of time. You're not that far off in terms of power from where my sister was when she began to change for the worse. Do you want to get sent to jail four or five times? I don't think so. You kids are too young to let yourselves ruin your futures. Do you really think elemental wielding is something we need in this world? And teaching it to children, no less? No. It's time to put the practice to a rest. We need to work towards peace, not towards building criminals."

At the press of a few buttons on a remote the commander pulled out

of a pocket, a hatch opened up on the left side of the city hall building from which a giant mechanical creation rolled out. What raced to Commander Sparrint's side was quite literally a huge, robotic orange and blue Shy Guy with wheels on its feet. When the translucent Shy Guy's mask split apart down and across the middle, Commander Sparrint activated the hovering technology in his boots and flew into the control booth within.

"I suppose if you do beat me, you've got a clear shot through this building onto Gatehouse Road," said Commander Sparrint, his robotic Shy Guy's mask closing. Once the robot's mask closed, Commander Sparrint's voice came through a built-in microphone and speaker system. "But can you handle the Father Mech?"

"We've seen this before," said Daisy. "Chrissy tried throwing one of these mech things at us, and it didn't work."

"Then she should've done more than just throw it at you," said Commander Sparrint.

Daisy paused, then scowled. "I wasn't being literal-"

A flurry of rockets flew out of one of the Father Mech's arms, forcing all of the Kruna into evasion. Unfortunately for Commander Sparrint, his attack did no harm to the Kruna and instead blitzed the road, roundabout, and a couple of nearby cars. Now scattered, all of the Kruna prepared their powers.

"Nice shot, jackass," Neva mumbled.

"Boy, we weave those!" Marut yelled.

"I can see where this will likely go," said Commander Sparrint, pulling a lever. The Father Mech's body morphed, transitioning from the appearance of a Shy Guy to the build of a Wiggler. Now, Commander Sparrint sat in a Wiggler head with several sections of torso and legs attached behind. The mechanical Wiggler then charged at the Kruna in a speedy stampede, first aiming at Neva, its nearest target.

"I'm right here, overgrown robot bug – bet ya still miss me!" Neva

yelled, shaking a fist at the incoming mech. Daisy grabbed Neva and ran off as the Father Mech rushed towards them, its feet stomping with street-cracking force. A Whirling Fortress attack from Bowser jammed one of the mech's eighteen feet inward, thereby adding a hitch to its march. However, one of the other feet kicked Bowser away off of his ricochet.

"I feel as though I should make you aware of yourselves," stated Commander Sparrint, veering his mech. "Six elemental wielders bringing an entire organization and its forces down says something."

Neva broke free from Daisy's hold and took her Chill Sickle out, spraying frost and sleet out by the Father Mech's Wiggler head for its feet to slip on. Her well-timed and accurately-delivered sheet of ice sent the Father Mech sliding onto its side. To help get itself up, the Father Mech rocked its body back and forth in the hopes of getting enough momentum to roll and regain its footing.

"Hey, you're old enough to remember the last Kruna, aren't you?" said Daisy. "The Kruna Chitan? That means you know what Kruna are all about! How can elemental wielding be bad when there's Kruna using elemental wielding for good?"

Commander Sparrint responded only after getting his Father Mech's legs back under it. "Oh, the Kruna Chitan! Didn't a whole city get ruined because of them? A lot of good that death and destruction caused. Hmm...now I get it. Your twisted, perverted sense of judgment must skew what 'good' and 'bad' mean to you. Yes, you're following up their act exceedingly well."

Bowser, Ramona, and Marut launched hand elemental bursts at the Father Mech, but they all seemed to inflict minimal damage on the machine. Each of the three again blasted more fire, light, and air at the Father Mech – this time from their Volt Fusion tools – as it started up another stampede, only for the mech to demonstrate incredible resiliency in running through each burst without much slowdown. Despite its fast speed and the vast reach its massive Wiggler Form had, the Father Mech's movement pattern was highly predictable and therefore avoidable. While every one of the Kruna dodged, Athelstan kept punching chunks of the street into the Father Mech with the aid of his Crush Gauntlets. The brute force of the

blunt asphalt proved more effective than the fire, light, and air attacks from Bowser, Ramona, and Marut.

Once the Father Mech got lined up to run at her again, Neva froze the street in its path and made it fall over a second time. Just as the Father Mech rocked back to its feet, Daisy smacked her Laser Drill Staff into its front-most left leg and made it collapse forward. At that point, the mech turned red. Literally. Just like a real Wiggler would have. Commander Sparrint got the Father Mech to spring back up in a jump and drove it at the Kruna, sounds of train whistles repeatedly blowing out of its head.

A brown, pointed aura thumped up around Athelstan, oscillating and undulating as he bridged his focus over his stone control into the portion of the road directly in front of him. The other Kruna all went on the defensive against the Father Mech's red stampede; but Athelstan stayed put, almost baiting Commander Sparrint to go for him. Before long, the MAE commander steered his Father Mech at Athelstan and hit the accelerator. The Father Mech's legs propelled it at Athelstan at its fastest speed yet, but the machine failed its attack the moment it got near the Kruna of Stone. At the stomp of his own booted, fortified foot, the road in front of Athelstan sprang up at an absurdly fast rate – fast enough to fling the heavy Father Mech over and past him with ample clearance.

In an unforeseen twist, what should have been a successful counter for Athelstan ended up failing too; for rather than crash onto the ground, the Father Mech transformed mid-flight into a Paratroopa with enormous jet and turbine-powered wings. The speed, fluidity, and precision of the Father Mech's transformation astonished the Kruna, for its change took less than a handful of seconds and put it in a safe hover in the immediate airspace. Still relatively calm and relaxed, Commander Sparrint now sat in the Father Mech's Paratroopa head.

"Oh, he's coming with them next-level strats, bro," said Marut.

"How did he have the awareness to pull that off?" said Bowser.

Giant spinning shells shot out of the Father Mech's abdomen, raining down on the area like boulders. Dodging the shells was

simple enough, if not counting the many times after initial contact with the road that they bounced. Many of the Bowser-sized shells bounced into and deflected off of each other, producing contained but uncontrolled chaos in a short amount of time. The shells caught all of the Kruna repeatedly – all except for Marut, who used his Alkemei to fly into the air and avoid the shells altogether. Saving his friends from enduring more shell bashing, Marut brought in a powerful downdraft that brushed the shells down Park Avenue.

"Now, why'd you go and do that?" asked Commander Sparrint. "You know other people will now have to deal with shells gliding on the streets."

"You're the one that sent them out at us!" snapped Marut.

"Yeah, but nobody told you to blow them away," replied the MAE commander.

A Volt-Fusion enhanced light burst out of Ramona's Solar Greatsword inflicted significant damage on the Father Mech, largely contrasting against the results a similar attack had on the mech when it was in its Wiggler mode. Following the success of Ramona's move, Bowser attacked with Volt Fusion flames. Neva added in her Volt Fusion-enhanced ice after Bowser's successful strike, further racking up damage on the Father Mech.

"Welp, he don't seem as tanky now," said Marut, aiming his Energized Air Saber. He blasted gusts charged with electricity and magnetics at the Father Mech, but Commander Sparrint countered the attempt with a spin of the mech's body and a retraction of its arms and legs. Marut's attack bounced off of the Father Mech's Paratroopa shell, as did the enhanced light blast Ramona fired the next instant.

Daisy gave out a command as erratic electricity and magnetic forces flickered around the seismic power channeled into the head of her Laser Drill Staff. "Athelstan, that shell's mimicking the Wiggler body! Smash it with some more of the road!"

"I'll one-up that with something better!" Athelstan said, activating his Alkemei Odina. "Give me a lift, Marut!"

Amid another batch of bulbous, bouncing shells, Marut swooped down at Athelstan and scooped him off of the ground. With the momentum Marut generated and carried, all he had to do was let go of Athelstan at a point high enough in the air for the Kruna of Stone to drop at the Father Mech from above. Athelstan got his Mountain Hammer up and ready to strike the moment after Marut sent him on his way. Even though Commander Sparrint put the Father Mech into a defensive shell spin, Athelstan's mighty double-strength hammer swing smacked the mech out of the air with enough force to create a shallow crater at the mech's point of impact with the road.

All six of the Kruna Yura waited near the impact site for the dust and debris to settle, Daisy and Neva holding elemental charges in their primary elemental tools and Marut maintaining a hover just inches off of the ground. Without warning, the Father Mech transformed yet again and built itself up into a towering Rex. Whether or not the transformation mattered was up for debate, for Daisy sprinted at the Father Mech and leapt at its torso to jam her drill staff and all the earth, seismic power, electricity, and magnetics it held into the machine. Running and jumping off of Daisy, Neva shot her Volt Fusion rifle on rapid-fire at the exact spot where Daisy had struck. Their combined attacks not only launched the Father Mech clear across the roundabout and into the city hall yard, but had also bore a hole into the Father Mech's underbelly.

"Your machines can't stop us!" declared Daisy, high-fiving with Neva.

"At this point, probably not," said Commander Sparrint, marching his mech back out onto the street. "But then again, who can? And what's stopping you from diving into corruption and sin if there's no one who can beat you?"

Once the Father Mech returned to the streets, it entered another transformation, exchanging its Rex form for a rather unorthodox and unforeseen build of a potted, four-headed Piranha Plant. The wheels on its pot moved incredibly slow, rendering the new form as all but immobile. Most of the motion instead seemed more concentrated on the Father Mech's Piranha Plant necks and mouths. The "pot" now housed the control cockpit where Commander Sparrint sat; and the dexterity he demonstrated with his mech's Piranha Plant heads

almost rivaled that of the real-life organism it copied.

The Piranha Plant heads breathed fire, lunged at the Kruna, shot seed-like projectiles, and grew thorns for vicious hooking attacks. But just as the Kruna had done with all of MAE's robots, mechs, and other machines – especially that night – they outlasted the offensive and proceeded to tear the Father Mech down piece by piece. Through a combination of Volt Fusion elemental wielding and brute force that Athelstan supplied, each Piranha Plant head succumbed to the Kruna's attacks and reached both electrical and mechanical failure. A short but intense and wild exchange of Piranha Plant attacks later, Commander Sparrint found himself sitting in a mech both covered in ice, flames, asphalt, and earthen material and flickering with electricity and gases. The Father Mech could no longer function in any way other than scooting around on its wheels. After receiving a warning siren, Commander Sparrint evacuated the Father Mech just seconds before its core melted down and exploded.

Despite Commander Sparrint's timely escape, the sizable explosion still pelted him and flung him inside the spacious square roundabout and near its center. He could not concern himself with the wreckage of the Father Mech, for he had six Kruna Yura standing by him. There, at the mercy of the formidable elemental wielders, Commander Sparrint sighed and stayed on his stomach.

"Do as you will," said Commander Sparrint, sounding no worse from his defeat. "Age was bound to get to me soon. I've made my peace long ago. Whatever happens to me is not important. I just have one request."

"And what is that?" Bowser asked.

"I'd like to finish the tea I had left in city hall," said Commander Sparrint. "Well, it has cooled down by now, I'm sure. I'll probably have to make a new cup."

Ramona knelt next to the MAE commander. "I wouldn't mind having a cup with you...if that's okay..."

Commander Sparrint smiled. "Oh, that would be lovely."

"What? Ramona?" Bowser said. "No, we can't just have some tea break with this guy! You know as well as we all do how deceptive MAE is. This could easily be yet another trick to try and get us all captured or killed."

"But, he doesn't sound deceptive," said Ramona. "He sounds nice."

"I'm not trying to be deceptive," said Commander Sparrint. "I could, but there would be no use in it. There is no real reason for you to have caution until you pass through the barrier at the start of Gatehouse Road. By now, Commander Sindograss has directed all the remaining Twilight City MAE forces you haven't encountered into Evershade Valley. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't do anything to any of you."

"I thought you wanted to," grumbled Neva.

"So did I," said Commander Sparrint. He rolled onto his shell and rocked to his feet. "But the reality is that I am a broken, old man who has no family and nothing left to live what little life I have left for. I thought I could help lead a revolution for the better of global society, but I can't even do that. Like I said earlier, I've seen what you're capable of doing. And after the way you tore through Twilight City tonight, I knew for certain that I could not stop you. The only reason I even still so much as stood against you was because of Commander Sindograss's orders. She is insistent on throwing everything that MAE has left at you; but, again, if you made it this far, what's really stopping you? What's stopping you from doing anything? You, some of the most powerful beings on the planet, are in position to do just about anything you wish. Unless you commit some critical mistake or error, we can't stop you. Tonight has made that clear."

Commander Sparrint took off his hat and turned away from the Kruna, staring into the mountains of Evershade Valley. "She knows too. After Joey Grayson's defeat a little while ago, she has to know. I believe she is in denial now. She has watched this budding MAE empire collapse right before her eyes. We manufactured what should have been an unstoppable force; but you six are seeming more like an unstoppable force, as time goes on. She can not accept what is happening. She is driven, more driven than anyone I

know; perhaps...driven to insanity. She could do something drastic, cause something catastrophic; and then what would she be? No better than the thing we've been trying to erase. I can not stick around and watch that happen."

With a sigh, Commander Sparrint tossed his hat and watched it land onto the hard ground. "This world needs a revolution, but not this way. I hope that the future brings a non-violent solution to the senseless violence that power creates, if even possible. But I will not be able to witness such an event. I thank you Kruna for allowing me to stay alive for this long, but it's not necessary. Do what you must and move on."

Daisy's face turned solemn, but soft. "No, we're not killing you."

"It really doesn't matter," said Commander Sparrint. "I'll die of old age soon. You must want to kill all of us for the trouble MAE has caused you."

"We're not going to," said Bowser. "If you're impatient for death and want to hurry the process along, find somebody else. Otherwise, your life is in your hands. What are you going to do with it?"

Only now did Commander Sparrint seem anything more than lighthearted. Turning somber, Commander Sparrint walked towards the city hall building, went across its lawn, and entered its doors. The Kruna stood their ground and did not get in the commander's way.

"What do you think he's doing?" asked Marut.

"Should we go in there?" asked Neva.

"There's nothing in there for us," said Daisy. "We just need to go through Gatehouse Road. I don't know what he could be doing in there, but we'll wait here for a little bit. If he doesn't come out, we'll go in."

The Kruna stayed there on the pavement of the square roundabout, waiting to see if Commander Sparrint would exit the city hall building. In a handful of minutes, just when the Kruna were about to

head for the building's entrance, its doors opened. Commander Sparrint marched across the lawn and out onto the street, now carrying two cups of tea and a backpack that he could not sling around his back because of his shell. He had abandoned his commander uniform in favor of an all-gray outfit.

Commander Sparrint stopped to hand a blue cup of tea to Ramona. "For you. It's green mixed with peppermint. I did not put sweetener. If you don't want it, you can discard it."

"Thank you..." Ramona said, taking the cup.

After giving her the tea, Commander Sparrint handed her a touch sensor key. "This is to get onto Gatehouse Road. It will take you straight to MAE Command Center. The key is compatible with any other gates you see there."

Once Ramona took the key, Commander Sparrint walked past the Kruna. He headed down Park Avenue, saying nothing more.

"Where are you going?" Daisy asked.

"Away," Commander Sparrint replied, barely audible. He kept walking. And he did not look back. For the whole time they watched him go, the Kruna were all speechless. Eventually, the Kruna could not see him anymore.

"Are you actually gonna drink it?" Neva asked Ramona.

"I guess so," Ramona replied. She hesitated for only a moment before sipping on the tea. With a deep breath, she looked at the key in her other hand. "If we're all ready, how about we go to Evershade Valley now?"

Daisy nodded. "Yeah... Let's finish this."

Daisy and Ramona guided the Kruna onto the start of Gatehouse Road. When they made it to the gate cutting off the route, Ramona put the special key to the touch screen at the gate's center. Gears and mechanical parts rotated and clicked, and the gate unlocked. The Kruna could now continue onto the main portion of Gatehouse Road, the path that would take them into Evershade Valley and to

MAE Command Center. The white walkway lights lining the wide cobblestone path on both sides illuminated their final march.

When Ramona finished her tea, she did not know what to do with the cup. She thought about leaving it somewhere, but ultimately decided against it. Instead, she put it away into her Hammerspace Belt.

Chapter XXXV

Gatehouse Road: Showdown at Evershade Valley:

Shortly into the Kruna Yura's march up Gatehouse Road – directly after passing behind city hall, even – they entered an environment almost unrecognizable in comparison to the harsh, metallic aesthetic of Twilight City. Now in a dark but open forest with mountains in the background, they knew without a doubt that they had entered Evershade Valley. Despite Evershade Valley's status under MAE control, the Kruna saw nothing drastic in terms of environmental mechanization. In fact, only the various scattered sections of metal fencing, gates, and the lighted cobblestone path they walked on interfered with the otherwise natural landscape. Gatehouse Road itself had a limited number of bends and turns, and it stayed relatively flat. A few stagnant puddles alongside the path reflected the bright moon above.

As expected, it did not take long for the Kruna to meet the first wave of MAE resistance. A healthy dose of robots numbering in the hundreds charged at them, including just about everything the Kruna had encountered up to that point. MAE Patrol Bots, Sentry Bots, Cyber Spider Bots, Titan Force D-Series Restrainers, Roller Defenders, and Auto-Wigglers added up to a count of a hundred and twenty-six just in one group alone. But by now, the Kruna knew how to handle the MAE forces; avoid their stun shots, don't let them get close, opt for attacks that could hit multiple targets, and make full use of their Volt Fusion elemental tools. In that manner, one hundred and twenty-six MAE robots fell to the six Kruna Yura.

Before the last of the robots already present fell, a second wave approached. This next squadron contained close to the same number, but Heavy Troopa RC-MRs, more Titan Force D-Series Restrainers, Turtle Defenders, and the daunting Wingweaver Disrupter Units served as the primary threats. Where defeating the first wave transpired cleanly, busting through the second wave did not go without some pain and bodily harm to each of the Kruna. When the Kruna were ready to move on from the now battle-scarred

area littered with metal and electronics, they all looked notably fatigued. Already, it had been a long night, with still more ahead. Much more. As they resumed their run up Gatehouse Road, Bowser noticed that Neva had a hobble to her gait.

"What happened to you?" Bowser asked, stopping the team.

"I don't know – I screwed up my damn ankle or something," grumbled Neva. "The right one buckled when I tried to roll right. I swear, my body sucks."

"Oh, Neva; don't say that!" exclaimed Ramona.

"But it's true!" said Neva. "It's short, it's skinny, it has no strength, and it's fragile. This body SUCKS. Remind me why I'm out here with you guys again?"

Daisy handed an Ultra Mushroom to Neva. "Because we need you."

After ingesting the Ultra Mushroom, Neva felt some improvement in her ankle. However, she noticed that each step on the right foot after they continued their brisk trot still produced a searing pain. Some sort of structural injury had happened to her ankle that was beyond the abilities of Mushrooms, it seemed. In addition to obviously hampered mobility for the normally swift and nimble ice wielder, just moving around on her feet would remain a challenge for the rest of the night.

"Just stay by me, Neva," said Daisy. "Any time you need to grab my hand, grab it."

"What do ya want me to grab your hand for?" Neva asked. "What do I look like? Some baby?"

Daisy frowned. "It's for balance, dummy, or if you get tired or weak and need help moving. You can put some of the pressure on me and use me for support."

"Oh," said Neva. "That makes sense..."

"These Volt Fusion tools are working tremendously," said Bowser. "But if MAE's robots will be coming at us in dense numbers like that,

we need to combine them with co-op techniques. The quicker we can cut their count down, the less of a chance they'll further hurt us."

"Gotcha, bro!" said Marut.

Rather than run into the next wave of MAE defenses however, the Kruna met a different, unwelcome surprise upon rounding a slight bend to the right. From the cover of bushes away from Gatehouse Road and by the trees leapt a fiendish light wielder demon the Kruna had seen several times before already. All of the Kruna stopped dead in their tracks at the sudden appearance of Kokoro, the Soul Stealer. As soon as Daisy recognized him, she backed up some, pushed Neva behind her, and transformed into her Nova Form. Glittery, sparkling, Nova-enhanced seismic earth power surrounded Daisy immediately.

"Just as I thought," Kokoro said. "I had a feeling you would make your way here; or rather, I knew you would."

"And how could you have done that?" said Bowser.

"It wasn't that hard," replied Kokoro. "It only took paying attention to the news to find out you had your eyes on MAE. And then, through a little independent surveillance and investigation on MAE of my own – and after seeing how you lot had a pattern of targeting major MAE territories – I anticipated that you would show up here sooner or later."

"How did you even get past the MAE defenses?" Ramona asked.

Kokoro narrowed his gaze, his face turning disgruntled as his Alkemei Ankh, the Master Pendant, glistened and flashed a dim pink glow. "I went through the mountains."

"Wait, was that literal?" asked Marut.

"That's not important," said Kokoro. "The subject of me ripping your arms off and beating you with them is more interesting, if you ask me."

"That's not gonna happen," Daisy said. "There's six of us here – the only thing that could end up getting ripped is that pendant from your

neck. Thankfully for you, now's not the best time-"

"You do not realize how hopelessly outmatched you really are," said Kokoro, his eyes turning glassy. "I had prided myself in gaining possession over powerful souls from across all of this planet. But now, I see that all of them were insignificant. It was a fruitless effort in the end. Their souls could not yield the immortality and kinds of power that I have discovered. No, they pale in comparison to *one* soul. Through this pendant, I have learned that there is but one ultimate soul of which no others can equal. And the best part? I already possess it."

"Didn't take long for this guy to start getting creepy," mumbled Athelstan.

"Start?" Ramona whimpered.

"Do you know what this means?" Kokoro said. "It means I have been immortal all along. There is not a single thing you can do to kill me. I am unending. You, on the other hand, are considerably terminal." The tips of his claws then flickered with golden flashes. "It also means that I get to bring pain upon every single being I cross paths with for the rest of time... Let me start with bringing the greatest of pain upon all of you!"

"We really don't have time for this, Kokoro," said Daisy. "Can we reschedule? Or make some sort of compromise so that we can-"

"No! No! NO!" Kokoro yelled. "All I have gotten from this world is hate and pain. I am not making any compromise! Once I unlock the powers of this soul, I'll grind all of society into oblivion! Then, all of your souls can get cast away into eternal damnation! How does that sound, Sarasa?! Do you have time for that? Think you can stop that?! I'll tell you right now – YOU CAN'T. The more this pendant reveals to me the ultimate soul, the more powerful I become. I dare you to try and get past me now. I *beg* you to try. You don't have a clue as to what you're truly up against! You might *think* you do, but you're DEAD wrong. Soon, however, you'll just be DEAD *and* WRONG. You should have known that from the moment you escaped from the Ice Shrine, you would never be free from my wrath again. Not until you cease to draw breath. All six of you, and

wherever your two friends are. And even then, you better prepare yourself for the torment I have in store for you in the afterlife. Your suffering will continue! Beyond the bounds of this physical world, I shall still, ceaselessly, relentlessly, without fail, ENSURE, that your souls will drown in everlasting agony and infinite despair! You were DOOMED the moment I laid eyes on you! You hear me?! YOU ARE FINISHED! FINISHED!... Is that green guy eating popcorn?"

Everyone looked at Marut. Sure enough, the Kruna of Air had a large bag of popcorn in one hand and a drink in the other. After finishing what he was already chewing on, Marut scooped another handful of popcorn into his mouth.

"Marut! What are you doing?" Bowser snapped.

"Having some popcorn and fruit punch," Marut replied.

"How – no *when* – did you get that?" asked Daisy.

Marut took a big gulp out of his fruit punch. "Well, actually, while you guys were fighting some robots or whatever when we were in Twilight City, I rushed into a movie theater and bought some snacks."

"Wha- you just left us while we were fighting, to get that?" asked Bowser.

"Who goes into a movie theater to buy snacks?!" asked Neva.

"It happens," said Ramona. "Apparently, there's a bit that people do where they go into movie theaters, buy some of the movie popcorn, and then leave without actually seeing the movie."

"Hey, who knew these Hammerspace Belts would make great cupholders!" said Marut. "I mean, it's a spill-proof MAE-brand cup anyways, but it stayed upright in this pocket!"

"You didn't get some for us?" asked Athelstan.

"Oh..." mumbled Marut. "I didn't know you wanted any..."

"YOU'RE NOT TAKING ME SERIOUSLY, ARE YOU?!" Kokoro

yelled.

Marut flipped some more popcorn into his mouth, electing to talk with his mouth full. "Probably should."

At the swift raise of an arm, Kokoro shot a laser out from his index finger. In addition to burning into the outer edge of Marut's upper left arm, the laser also pierced a hole in his popcorn bag. A large quantity of the delicious, butter-soaked popcorn rolled out of the hole and onto the ground, now only suitable for forest animal consumption.

Marut clutched at his new wound, and Kokoro dashed at him the very next instant with light power extending around each of his left hand claws. If not for Daisy jumping in the way and catching Kokoro by the wrist, Kokoro would have ripped clean through Marut. All Marut could do in the incredibly short time that had elapsed was flinch and let out an oddly high-pitched yelp.

"Get your hand off of me," Kokoro hissed, trying to urge his Light Claw out of Daisy's hold. " *You* can wait. I need to teach this joker proper respect!"

"Yeah, good idea," said Daisy. "How about a joke? Do you have change for a fruit punch?"

Kokoro frowned. "What? That doesn't even make any sense – what's fruit punch equal to in-"

Before Kokoro finished his thought, Daisy brought an uppercut into the base of his neck. Now instead of talking, Kokoro flopped onto the ground coughing and gagging.

"That's okay," said Daisy. "There's no punchline."

Ramona giggled and clapped. "Good one, Daisy."

"That doesn't make any sense either!" Kokoro sputtered out. As he got up, he saw the six Kruna Yura surround him in a hexagon. He could feel the Alkemei Ankh vibrating, as if trying to give him feedback. While the Ankh acted up, Kokoro glanced at each of the Kruna before him. His pupils constricted as his eyes came to a rest

on Neva, who awkwardly stood with her hips leaning to her left to get pressure off of her right ankle. The sight made Kokoro chuckle.

"I can smell pain," Kokoro said under his breath.

"Now that's just unnecessarily edgy," said Athelstan.

Kokoro turned his whole body towards Neva. "A whole wealth of swollen, tender, throbbing pain."

"An accurate description of what you'll be in if you keep moving," said Daisy.

"Oh...heh, heh, heh, heh..." Kokoro mumbled. "No."

Kokoro sprang into the air with an incredibly high jump, which provoked Marut into flying after him seconds later. As soon as Marut neared him, Kokoro smacked him down with a backhand fist into the bushes. Ramona blasted light from her sword, Bowser breathed fireballs, and Neva shot ice bullets at Kokoro; but all projectiles missed. The Soul Stealer's jump and fall speed both were astonishingly fast, to the point of his body emitting a crashing sound when he landed behind Neva.

Neva tried to shift herself away from Kokoro, but her injured body could not move nearly as fast as normal. With her handicapped agility and her last move aggravating her hurt ankle, Kokoro exerted almost no effort in snatching Neva by the back collar of her shirt. He yanked on her with enough aggression to create a massive, audible tear in her shirt, also further forcing pressure on her ankle in the process and drawing a painful scream as her feet dragged along the ground. Every one of the other Kruna directed their tools at Kokoro, only for him to pull Neva in front of him a second later and jerk her rifle out of her hands. Now, the Kruna had their aim on Neva instead.

"Go ahead and attack," said Kokoro. "I'll just block them."

Daisy took a step forward and pointed at him. "Let her go."

"Okay," said Kokoro. He let go of her shirt collar. Before Neva even noticed she was free, Kokoro grabbed her by her neck.

Consequently, she now had difficulty breathing.

"That's not what she meant," said Bowser.

"But it was a good idea," said Kokoro. "The shirt would not have held together under the pressure, and the last thing I need is to see your disgusting nude forms. Although, I suppose it would be humiliating. Still, I'm much more interested about the *inside* of a body."

"Stop playing!" Bowser yelled. "Let her go!"

"Oh, how's this?" Kokoro said, raising Neva up from the ground. When he heard Neva start whimpering and crying, his grin grew greater.

"That's it," Marut grumbled, lighting up his saber with power.

Kokoro again jerked Neva in place. "Ah, ah, ah; you should be careful about how you use that."

Athelstan's eyes narrowed. He raised his foot, ready to stomp up some of the cobblestone path in an attempt to disrupt Kokoro. Unfortunately, the neurotic Soul Stealer picked up on the Kruna of Stone's slight movement and angled his free hand at the side of Neva's face. When he saw an orb of light form in Kokoro's palm, Athelstan set his foot down without exerting any stone power.

"That's right," said Kokoro. "I am in complete control over this rag doll's fate. Pick carefully your next course of action."

None of the Kruna did anything further. They still had their elemental tools up, but they did not actively let any more of their energy flow into them. The longer Kokoro held onto Neva, the more distressed the rest of the Kruna became.

"So what now?" said Kokoro. "Anybody have any ideas? Daisy? No? Fresh out? Can't think of anything? Frozen with fear? Paralyzed with panic? Dare I say, *choking* it all away?"

A quick, forceful squeeze on Neva's neck threw her into a coughing fit. It was as if twin waterfalls of tears fell from Neva's strained eyes. By now, Neva's breathing had fully transitioned into wheezing. No

one knew what to do.

"I am rather curious about this human," said Kokoro, dispelling his light energy. "She seemed to be in significantly more pain than the rest of you. I wonder if she's injured somewhere..."

Neva let out a helpless scream of terror when she felt a knee slam into her lower back. Another cry came out when Kokoro chopped her in her upper left arm, and another when he hit her left knee. Upon noticing how awkwardly Neva's right ankle hung, Kokoro slammed a hard kick there and drew an utterly deafening shriek.

"There it is!" cheered Kokoro.

"Cut it out!" demanded Daisy.

Kokoro frowned. "What?"

Daisy turned beyond livid. "Just stop already! We get it! Quit dragging this out!-"

"This is MINE to drag out!" Kokoro cut-in, madly scowling. "This is MY game, MY story, MY WORLD! Unless you REALLY want me to *cut* to the chase, then kneel!"

Bowser's anger heightened. "What-"

"I said KNEEL!" Kokoro howled.

"No!" shouted Daisy. "We are not-"

"TO YOUR KNEES, OR HER HEAD POPS OFF!" screamed Kokoro.

After a moment of hesitation, Daisy dropped down on one knee. The other Kruna saw Daisy down and knew almost right away what she knew. One at a time, each of the others followed suit.

"Drop your weapons," said Kokoro.

"Actually, they're 'tools-' " Athelstan tried to say.

"Drop. Them," Kokoro hissed.

Each of the five free Kruna did as they were told. For Neva's sake, they had to.

"How pathetic," said Kokoro. "All it takes is endangering some forgettable runt. You should really get your priorities straight."

The Kruna stayed silent. In a rough and unforgiving manner, Kokoro undid Neva's Alkemei Hien. He let the Hien drop to the ground. He then charged an absurd amount of light power into his free hand and shot it at the Hien. In addition to burning a hole clear through the cobbles, the blast left the Hien in a charred, likely unusable state.

"Just sorting out the junk," said Kokoro. He snatched Neva's Chill Sickle from her person. "A child's toy. Why would you ever want to carry around a glorified toothpick?"

Another tormented scream screeched out from deep within Neva's throat when Kokoro again smacked his boot into her injured ankle. The entirety of her right leg quivered uncontrollably. And yet another strike to the leg produced both a harrowing cry and a popping noise.

"Kokoro! Just let her go!" Daisy yelled. "Please! We did what you asked; now let her go!"

Kokoro went back to frowning. "I never said anything about letting her go! I just told you what to do! I said nothing about me letting her free. You really should've paid more attention. You also should've thought twice about pulling popcorn out in front of me!"

Neva's screaming had now quieted to rugged groaning. In her knelt stance, Ramona had her eyes closed and her hands joined together, possibly praying. She was shivering almost as much as Neva. Shock and horror filled the rest of the Kruna. The instant Daisy got to her feet, Kokoro pushed the face of the Chill Sickle against the side of Neva's face. Almost as quick, Daisy returned to a kneel.

"Try something again, and her mouth comes right off," said Kokoro. "No more warnings. Not a single wrong move more... Unless..." He then pointed the Chill Sickle at Daisy. "You would like to substitute

for your friend here? Er, no, how about this – I'll torture every single one of your friends. And you'll have to sit there and watch them all suffer. At least then, *you'll* have a chance for survival – because by the time I get to you, there'll be no one else left alive to threaten you with."

Kokoro momentarily stopped talking when he heard Neva hoarsely coughing. "I don't think I'll be able to use this thing for much longer. Should I go for the koopa next, or the guy who thought it was a good time for a snack?"

"You like hearing yourself, don't you?" said Bowser.

"I like seeing your reactions," said Kokoro. "Your fear, your disgust, your anger, your hate, your misery, your pain... Oh, Daisy; remember when you ruined my arm?... I still didn't get to return the favor."

Kokoro dropped the Chill Sickle and grabbed a hold of Neva's left arm. He then walked closer to Daisy, stopping only inches away from her. He laughed as he watched Daisy grit her teeth and tremble in restrained rage.

"I have to make sure you see it and hear it clearly," said Kokoro. "Get a good, long look at her now, because this is the last time you'll see her this healthy."

Daisy could feel herself tearing up out of pure frustration. If she so much as moved – let alone did anything to try helping Neva – then it would all but mean the end for the ice wielder. Kokoro's eyes shifted rapidly among the other four Kruna there as well, therein rendering them just as useless. Neva could not do a thing for herself. Her body was now limp throughout.

With none of the Kruna Yura there able to do a thing, a breakthrough came in the form of a cannon of water blasting Kokoro in his back and knocking Neva free. The defeated Kruna of Ice rolled along the ground and did not move on her own when her momentum stopped. Kokoro went flying into a nearby tree but rebounded off of the trunk immediately to a stable stand. Daisy, Bowser, Athelstan, Ramona, and Marut had not moved, other than to look in the

direction from which the water had come.

The Energized Ocean Trident responsible for such an attack rested in the palms of a man that appeared out of thin air wearing all-navy blue summer attire highlighted with gold and white trim. The collar of his royal blue midriff jacket hid the bracing of his recovered Alkemei Inpei, and the messiness of his long, brown ponytail made identifying his face difficult until he ran closer to the group.

While the newcomer approached, Ramona dashed straight for Neva to check on her. The act prompted Kokoro to flare a quick-charge of light power in one of his hands at them, which in turn provoked Daisy into jumping at him and kneeing him before he could get the blast off. Such a speedy and brutal attack pushed Kokoro far enough away to give the Kruna some relative breathing room. Knowing already that the newcomer was Warra, Daisy did not bother turning around to greet him. Her furious gaze stayed glued on Kokoro.

"Warra, you could not have come at a better time," said Athelstan.

"I thought you said you weren't going to help us," Bowser remarked.

"Circumstances have changed," said Warra. "It would be better for everyone involved if I accompanied you. You are my friends, after all."

"Great," said Kokoro. "Seven of you. Thanks for coming, pretty boy; now I only have to hunt down that dark guy."

"We have names," said Athelstan. "Just so you know."

"Don't care," said Kokoro. "You'll all be called 'Dead' before the night's over."

Bowser pointed a thumb at Daisy. "Are you sure about that?"

Kokoro's face filled with concern when he looked at the seething Nova Form Kruna of Earth. Hunched over and turning red with fury, Daisy looked like a smaller, leaner version of a ravenous, brutish beast. Her Alkemei Vranzer lit up and glinted. Miraculously, Daisy pulled together a near-instantaneous Crystal Fist around her left

hand. After just a quick flick of her wrist, the Crystal Fist snapped into the upgraded Final Crystal Fist.

However, Kokoro soon replaced his concern with a smirk of malice. The Alkemei Ankh responded to the Vranzer's glow and now shined too. Waves of pink, light blue, black, and red flowed up around Kokoro in a matter of seconds. That did not stop Daisy from attacking. Through blazing speed, Daisy dashed and lunged at Kokoro with her Final Crystal Fist ready to strike.

Kokoro thought he had the powers within the Ankh now protecting him and giving him aid. But just as the Ankh released a massive pulse of power, the Vranzer let out a flash that negated and disbanded the burst. The Final Crystal Fist pounded Kokoro in the chest a half-second later, producing cracking, smashing noises on impact. Daisy's punch hit with an immense amount of force great enough to send Kokoro shooting through trees and bushes. His body left behind visible air wafts and distortion as he flew.

Almost as soon as the hit had connected, the Ankh came flying off of Kokoro. It rattled into the bushes as well, though not as far as Kokoro did. The Ankh made a loud ting when it fell through the leaves and hit the grass. The noise from Kokoro's crashing drowned out the sounds from the Ankh to everyone but Bowser and Warra. Final Crystal Fist still formed, Daisy charged into the trail Kokoro's body left behind to chase him down.

"I don't know if I've ever seen her *that* mad before," said Ramona.

"She's set on doing what we all want to do, I'm sure," said Bowser. "There's one person that needs to die. Screw what's honorable or not. Kokoro is anything but honorable."

"What was with all that flashing before the hit though?" asked Marut.

"Look there," Warra suddenly said, pointing to the side of where Daisy ran.

The six Kruna Yura there saw the Ankh rise from the bushes and enter the air in a hover, power flowing out around it in a sickly, melded smog. Sparing little time, the Ankh floated overhead past the

Kruna and accelerated away. It flew in a northward direction along Gatehouse Road.

"It might be heading in the direction of MAE Command Center," said Warra.

"Why's it going there?" said Bowser. "Marut, chase after it!"

"Don't, Marut," said Warra. "It's not the most important concern right now. And if it's heading to the command center, we'll encounter it when we get there."

"And if it detours and goes somewhere else?" asked Bowser.

"Then let it go," said Warra.

Bowser frowned. "Why?"

"We don't need to go after it right this second," said Warra.

"I believe we do," said Bowser. "It's utterly pointless to finally have separated Kokoro from the Ankh, just for him to hunt it down and reclaim it."

"It looks to me like Kokoro's preoccupied in another direction," said Warra.

"What if it goes trying to look for the Palace of Shadows so it can meddle with the Shadow Queen's crypt?" said Bowser.

"If it really wanted to, it could have taken over Kokoro and gone there by now," said Warra. "Osiris knows there's nothing he can directly do to the Shadow Queen's seal right now, especially not with he himself sealed, however imperfect the seal binding him to the Ankh is. There's no chance of any tampering by the Ankh being successful, so we don't have to worry about any of that right now."

"But this might be our only chance to secure the Ankh," said Bowser. "I think grabbing that takes precedent."

"Actually, maybe there isn't much to be urgent about yet," said Ramona. "My Motomeru's giving me a signal on how far away the

Ankh is, now that nobody's wearing the Ankh. I think as long as my Motomeru keeps glowing, we should be fine. And if it gets out of range, we could abort our mission here, and I could scope it out. Besides that, we have to make sure Neva's...not too hurt..."

The Mushroom that Ramona had given Neva did little to help her, even less than the one she had received earlier from Daisy. Neva lay on her side, moaning and showing minimal movement. Her right leg, particularly her ankle, seemed lame. It took some time for her to start trying to get up, all while Daisy was busy searching in the brush for Kokoro. The other Kruna heard nothing coming from the trees and bushes other than the distant rustle of leaves and branches.

Neva appeared significantly more pale than usual, and she struggled to stay on her feet after Ramona helped her up. The Kruna of Ice still trembled some, fear and panic also still in the process of dissipating from her spooked, pained expression. Once under her own power, Neva hobbled to the hole Kokoro blasted in the ground. The now blackened Alkemei Hien sat at the bottom of the hole.

"Be careful, Neva," said Ramona. "Take it easy, okay?"

"Yeah, dude," said Marut. "You just got through some twisted Kokoro abuse."

"Neva, you should go somewhere safe and wait this out," said Warra. "One of us can escort you. You're probably not fit for what we're about to walk into."

Neva ignored the others. She slumped down to her knees by the hole in the ground and reached in to pull out the degraded Null Alkemei Hien. After Neva reequipped her Alkemei, its gem connected to Neva's power and responded with its usual visual cue of synchronization.

"What good is putting that back on going to do you?" said Bowser.

"He didn't break it," said Neva, shakily returning to her feet.

"But will it even work?" asked Bowser.

"We'll see," said Neva, now moving to retrieve her elemental tools.

"Alright, let's get this over with."

"But, Neva, your ankle," Ramona said.

"Whatever," said Neva. "Can't worry about that now. I'll tough it out. Even if all I'll end up being able to do is stand around and shoot, I'll at least do that."

Soon after Neva reclaimed her Freeze Coil Sniper and her Chill Sickle, Daisy emerged from the brush at the side of Gatehouse Road. Though still in Nova Form, she no longer had her Final Crystal Fist. She also did not appear as mad, but she still seemed notably upset.

"He's gone," said Daisy. "I couldn't find him. He ran away."

"The next time anyone sees him, kill him," said Warra. "He's not worth sparing."

"No arguments here," said Daisy. "Neva, I'm so sorry we couldn't do anything sooner-"

"What are you sorry for?" said Neva. "I'd've been dead if you tried to do anything. This was best-case scenario for me, obviously. Because I've always got loads of crap to deal with, why should I expect anything else. Let's just get to the Command Center already."

"Are you sure you're okay to go?" asked Daisy.

"Yeah," Neva replied. "I'm okay...-ish. No, I'm not really okay. But I'm not about to abandon you guys. I can walk."

"Hey – anytime you need help, I'll walk with you," said Daisy. "I'll carry you if I have to. Just, if you can, try to stay out of trouble. You're already compromised."

"Can you tell me something I don't know?" said Neva. Her white shirt too ripped up, she tore it off entirely and tossed it aside. That left her with just a sleeveless gray undershirt providing upper body protection. She then brushed some of her bangs out of her face and coughed up a large blob of bloody phlegm on the ground. "I wasn't

gonna just run headfirst into a swarm of MAE bots."

Ramona sighed. "I guess she can't be feeling too bad if she's sounding like that."

"Let's get a move on then," said Bowser. "The faster we do what we need to do, the better."

"I'll point us to the building you're looking for," said Warra. "Fair bit of warning – it's not what you would expect."

Chapter XXXVI

Gatehouse Road: Storm the Mountain Headquarters! Vs. MAE Defense System 2.2.4!...?:

The seven Kruna Yura hurried up Gatehouse Road as fast as Neva could manage moving. She could handle an awkward, half-speed run, but not much more than that. For every subsequent encounter with MAE defenses, Neva stayed towards the back of the group and relied solely on her long-range attacks in support of the others. With all the trauma she had experienced that night, her aim and decisiveness alternated between shaky and just plain careless. Still, she demonstrated reliable, above-average accuracy.

The waves of defense the Kruna busted through featured every single type of MAE field robot they had faced, as well as more that they had not previously encountered. Fox Assault Tracers, robotic foxes built and trained for fast attacks and restraining targets, headed several of the MAE robot groups. The Fox Assault Tracers were the last thing Neva needed to face, for their agile and shifty mobility made her a liability. Because of Neva's compromised state, Nova Daisy stuck by her for immediate defense and protection whenever they encountered a group featuring the Fox Assault Tracers.

As they got closer to a rounded, wide hill further up Gatehouse Road, Valkyrian Guardians entered the mix of MAE's robotic defenses. These heavily-armored mechanical fighters in white, blue, and gold were winged and mimicked smooth organic movement rivaling elite athletes and even wielders. They held swords and forearm shields as weaponry, specializing in speed and up-close combat. The Valkyrian Guardians presented as much difficulty as did the Wingweaver Disrupter Units, which made getting past the group consisting solely of Wingweavers and Valkyrians a trying trial. Having Warra back helped tremendously; for though Warra did not have a Volt Fusion tool, he was still a water wielder and had a tool that could add electricity to his water techniques.

And yet, the hardest of the mass-produced robots awaited in the final handful of waves. When the Kruna Yura arrived at a point on Gatehouse Road where the bottom of the hill ahead became clear, they noticed that a multi-story building had been built into the hillside. The well-lit establishment appeared as though it stood covered in melted earth and rock with how much of its structure existed as a part of the hill, and it also had copious amounts of windows – including a few wide ones near the top that stretched across the entirety of the building's visible walls and even into the hill itself.

At that point, MAE defenses now featured the Machines of 999. These armored, mechanical fighters in white, gray, and brown also exhibited the same mobility that the Valkyrian Guardians did. The Machines of 999 used spears and shields, attacking with brutal thrusts and chains of electricity from their spearheads. Though not much more difficult at first glance, the ominous Machines of 999 easily outclassed all other MAE sentry machines. All the remaining MAE squadrons the Kruna faced had a minimum of two and a maximum of nine Machines of 999. Taking down just one required the effort of multiple Kruna, even with the use of their Volt Fusion tools. In defeating them, the Kruna observed through the wreckage that the Machines of 999 had *Super* Shine Sprites powering them.

Upon reaching the final battalion defending MAE Command Center in front of the large gate at the end of Gatehouse Road, the Kruna Yura faced nothing but Wingweavers, Valkyrians, and Machines of 999. Fighting this group of robots, particularly the Machines of 999, felt more like fighting organic, sentient beings than did the other classes of robots; and clearing through them exhausted a substantial deal of each Kruna Yura's power, Volt Fusion reserves included. By the time the Kruna dismantled the last of the robots, they needed a break to catch their breath and use recovery items, both for energy and for healing.

With the trail of broken metal from thousands of robots they left along Gatehouse Road and the suddenly quieted area in front of MAE Command Center, the Kruna assumed they had a minute or two to recollect themselves before proceeding onward. However, they did not account for a special apparatus positioned at the top of

the final metal gate barring their entry to the building built into the wide hill ahead of them. Its appearance bore a resemblance to the MAE Defense System the Kruna Yura encountered in MAE Isle Delfino, except with an abundance of curved, angular projections and plating and a shiny mono-gray appearance with only traces of white, blue, brown, and gold. Unknown to the Kruna, the machine had its eye open the entire time. They only noticed the machine when it detached itself from the metal gate and entered a hover.

"Malicious group threatening!" the machine said. "Initiating counteroffensive!"

"Hey, aren't you that defense system we fought in Isle Delfino?" asked Athelstan.

"Do not confuse me with that model," the machine responded. "I run on Defender OS 2.2.4, and I am built to handle the Fighting Wire Frame codec add-on and approximately three times more RAM."

The next instant, MAE Defense System 2.2.4 beamed a wave of red light from its eye onto the Gatehouse Road cobbles below it. From the light, three separate holographic figures formed. One figure resembled a small, fairy-like girl with an icy wand, while the two others took on hulkish, muscular shapes with snowball bodies and girlish, twin-ponytailed skulls. All three of the red holograms had an exoskeleton of brighter wires, with their eyes and cores glowing a piercing scarlet hue.

"Now, you will pay for thinking I am a weaker model," said MAE DS 2.2.4. "Holo Jojora & Friends, eliminate!"

"Yeah, I'm gonna sit this one out completely," said Neva, inching to the far back of the group.

Holo Jojora waved her wand and called forth an ice storm. The swaft of ice and snow curved into a diagonal at the Kruna, ironically meeting resistance soon after its inception. Despite what she had just said, Neva had her sniper up and her focus on the incoming storm. Through her elemental control, Neva overpowered Holo Jojora's ice and deflected and diverted it up and around the Kruna.

"Okay, maybe not," said Neva.

Daisy gave Neva a thumbs up. "Support from the back is all we need. Don't worry about doing a thing more!"

Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena both charged at the Kruna with their arms up, as if ready to grab them. One made a beeline for Athelstan, and the other went for Marut. Intimidating as the massive holograms were, Athelstan smacked the one coming at him away with his hammer. Marut flew from Holo Teeheena's clutches before she could snag him.

Holo Jojora darted to the frontmost Kruna and waved her wand. Daisy and Ramona felt their footing loosen as ice formed under them. Their legs then locked up when ice trapped them by their ankles. Once Bowser breathed a fireball at Holo Jojora however, Daisy and Ramona found themselves in no immediate danger; that is, until Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena turned to them and got set to throw some haymakers.

Still, the Kruna collectively outnumbered the holograms by four. While Neva undid the ice around Daisy and Ramona, Warra and Bowser put down an elemental assault on Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena. Marut had Holo Jojora on the run in an aerial chase around the area, but she had just enough focus to erect ice pillars in front of her friends to shield them.

Warra and Bowser stopped launching elementals when they noticed their attacks clashing with the ice pillars. Soon afterwards, Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena rolled around the ice pillars and encased themselves in snowballs. Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena rumbled towards Warra and Bowser, but their efforts were in vain. Daisy shoulder bashed one of the snowballs, and Athelstan lowered his shoulder shield into the other snowball.

Holo Jojora crashed to the ground under the force of cutting gusts, electricity, and magnetic forces. Marut landed from his flight at the exact instant Holo Jojora's form broke apart. That left Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena, who put on holographic lipstick and makeup and locked their sights again on Athelstan and Marut.

If the prospect of monstrous kissy-faced holograms winking at them did not creep Athelstan and Marut out, the holograms then dashing at them to grab them did. Fortunately for them, both holograms met a storm of fire, light, water, ice, electricity, and magnetics before even reaching them. Holo Chucklissa and Holo Teeheena glitched as they flew backwards, breaking apart moments after contact with the metal gate that barred entry to MAE Command Center.

"This is only the beginning!" MAE DS 2.2.4 yelled.

"I can imagine," said Bowser.

MAE DS 2.2.4 activated another fanning beam from its eye, calling forth another holographic entity. A towering skeletal dragon pieced together and materialized its wire frame out of the light. Its form one of monstrous stature, the imposing holographic dragon finished taking shape while MAE DS 2.2.4 prepared to bring forth a copy of something else.

"Holo Bonetail!" said MAE DS 2.2.4. "And..."

MAE DS 2.2.4 flared an even larger beam from its eye than it did for Holo Bonetail. The massive, flaming beast that formed in the red glow looked familiar only to Daisy, Bowser, and Warra; for the other Kruna did not get a chance to encounter it. This colossal animal that the now-forming hologram represented had served under Elkon as a guardian in the Fire Shrine.

"Holo Flame Behemoth!" MAE DS 2.2.4 ordered. "Stomp this malicious group into nothing!"

But before Holo Flame Behemoth finished taking shape, its body glitched, flickered, and broke apart. Holo Bonetail followed suit the next second. The Kruna waited for something further to happen, but nothing did. With no new holographic enemy, MAE DS 2.2.4 was by itself. Its eye now seemed concerned.

"Hold on," MAE DS 2.2.4 said. "I am getting a notice to update my software. Could you please wait for a little bit? I am locked out of the database until I get the latest software installed."

Confused, the Kruna exchanged looks with one another. Bowser shook his head, and Daisy shrugged. Ramona anxiously clutched at her neck and bit her lip, Marut kicked a loose cobble, Neva groaned, and Athelstan chuckled a little.

"I'm sorry," MAE DS 2.2.4 said, reaching a hand around to scratch its metal body. "This is so awkward. I'm embarrassed about this."

MAE DS 2.2.4 did not do anything else. It maintained its hover, waiting on its software to update. The Kruna waited. MAE DS 2.2.4 waited. No one said a thing. Neva seemed to be the only one out of the group upset, showing impatience as opposed to the others feeling – as MAE DS 2.2.4 had said – awkward.

"The Doctor probably thought it was a good idea to update, in case you got this far," MAE DS 2.2.4 said. "But you did arrive particularly fast, and sooner than estimated."

Warra squinted and mumbled, "The Doctor...?"

"It shouldn't take too long," said MAE DS 2.2.4. "I would say, about four minutes, depending on connection speed?"

"Why did that sound uncertain?" asked Athelstan.

"Four minutes!" said MAE DS 2.2.4. "Sooner than that, for sure!"

Again, the Kruna waited. MAE DS 2.2.4 waited, twiddling its fingers. As unsettling and awkward as the situation was, the Kruna appreciated the break in action. Still, it all seemed like a complete waste of time.

"Do you guys want to listen to some lo-fi beats while you wait?" MAE DS 2.2.4 asked.

"Oh, rad!" said Marut. "Put 'em on, robo dude!"

MAE DS 2.2.4 tuned to a 24/7 lo-fi beats station and played the music through its body's speakers. Ramona, Marut, and Athelstan slumped to the ground. Nova Daisy cupped her elbows and looked up at the starry night sky. Bowser folded his arms and tapped a foot to the chill beat.

"Three minutes," MAE DS 2.2.4 said. "About three minutes. Left."

Neva sighed. "What's the point of these stupid updates in the first place?"

"Well, uh, every machine needs to be running in tip-top shape," said MAE DS 2.2.4. "We need to have the latest software installed to optimize our performance. Sometimes, that may mean updating multiple times per week. It's tedious, but it's for the best."

"Aren't we lucky," said Daisy.

"Oh, you are!" said MAE DS 2.2.4. "This is supposed to come with some cool new features! Like, uh, new density specs for all Holo Defenders! And, uh, more accurate vertex mapping! I should also be able to recreate old battle music too!"

"Battle music for what?" asked Bowser.

"For...the...Holo Defenders..." MAE DS 2.2.4 mumbled. "That's the one I was looking forward to the most! The Mother Computer has been able to do that for as long as I have been built. Kinda."

"When were you built?" Ramona asked.

"Uh...some time last week?" the machine replied.

Once conversation stopped, awkward silence returned. Maybe even more awkward than before. It seemed as though the situation grew more bizarre with each passing second.

"Two minutes remaining," MAE DS 2.2.4 said. "So...yeah... Chilly night out, tonight..."

"I wish it was cooler," Neva said.

"But you are in a tank top," said MAE DS 2.2.4. "Ice wielders' tolerance to cold eludes my understanding."

"It helps that my ankle is making me sweat like crazy," Neva muttered.

"The temperature did dip," said Daisy. "But it's still summer. It's not like we can see our breath."

"There is a cold front that just blew by to the north," said MAE DS 2.2.4. "So, it will be unseasonably cool for a few days..."

Daisy nodded. "Hmm..."

"Especially out here in the mountains, you know..." said MAE DS 2.2.4.

"Yup," Daisy said with a sigh.

"Uh...sorry," MAE DS 2.2.4 mumbled. "Just trying to strike up some small talk... But, I, uh, guarantee you that you'll be swiftly terminated once these updates are finished!"

"Uh-huh," Daisy said.

"Yes, it'll all be worth the wait!" MAE DS 2.2.4 said. "Look forward to your thrashing soon!"

"Okay," said Daisy.

"How much time's left now?" asked Marut.

"Still two minutes remaining," replied MAE DS 2.2.4.

"How?!" snapped Neva. "I'd say four minutes passed already!"

"You can't really be sure how much time is left until the status bar goes from minutes to seconds," said MAE DS 2.2.4. "Ooh! I need to update my GPS and Chirper apps too! I should probably get those out of the way while I'm at it. Stopping everything to run updates is a pain."

Neva groaned and smacked herself in the face. "Seriously..."

"I hope I don't have to restart myself once these are finished," MAE DS 2.2.4 said.

The Kruna's "four-minute" wait got cut short when a column of

electrified water shot through the air and smothered MAE DS 2.2.4. Bouncing off of the gate behind it following the blast's conclusion, MAE DS 2.2.4 crashed to the ground in a soaking wet, twitching mess. Though it continued convulsing and flickering with electricity, the machine no longer seemed to be functioning properly. By the time it stopped moving, the Kruna knew it would never operate again. Sadly, the Kruna did not get to see the cool new features that the robot would have gained in its update.

"You're welcome," Warra said, twirling his trident.

"Aw, it was almost finished," said Ramona. "It was really trying."

"I believe we've wasted enough time out here, don't you?" said Warra. "You're here for a reason."

" *We* are, yes," said Bowser. "Ramona, you're on."

Ramona pulled out the MAE touch sensor key Commander Sparrint had given her and opened the final gate. A short trot to the last set of metal MAE security doors awaited through the brick and iron walkway on the other side of the wall of tall black poles. But before the Kruna could head towards the doors, the doors opened. From within MAE Command Center, a woman marched out and approached the Kruna. Her appearance was nothing short of shocking.

"That's it," said Athelstan. "I've seen it all."

The woman that stopped in the final gate's entryway bore an exact resemblance to Daisy. Everything about her looked identical to Daisy, save for her orange clothing with bits of black and silver as opposed to Daisy's primarily black outfit with silver serving as the lone accent. The woman also was not in Nova Form, and she did not have any elemental tools on hand at all.

"There's two of her?!" grumbled Neva. "This was the last thing I needed to see."

The second Daisy seemed far more mean and agitated than Nova Daisy. Interestingly, the doppelganger punched her knuckles

together and molded twin fists of earth. Daisy herself almost always converted the earth to crystal straight away when encasing a hand or foot for offense. She also only did one side at a time, never double. This second Daisy forwent any crystal formation and committed to her Dual Earth Fists.

"That's a really advanced hologram," said Marut.

"That's no hologram, my boy," said Athelstan.

"We've seen this before, remember?" said Bowser. "In the future, one of Marissa's archfiends. I think we've got ourselves an impostor here."

"She's a really good impostor," said Ramona.

"Hey, girl in orange," said Daisy. "What's the big idea? Why do you have to look like that? You couldn't choose someone else to copy?"

"Copy?" the second Daisy replied. "You're the one copying me!"

Nova Daisy smirked in annoyance and ran her fingers through some of the spiked projections of hair protruding over her forehead. "Sorry. I guess I'm doing it all wrong then. I just realized there's something you can't do."

The orange-clothed Daisy presented another stunner, letting out an angry, guttural scream. With a tremble of the earth, she transformed. The rush of crackling, snapping silver power that rose up around her preceded her shift into Nova Form, her body matching the first Daisy's powered-up physical changes. With both the Daisy in black and the Daisy in orange now in Nova Form, their energy signatures mirrored one another's as well.

"Wow, things went from zero to a thousand real quick," said Athelstan.

"She's a really good impostor!" Ramona anxiously repeated.

" *Who* are you?" Daisy said.

"I'm Deiji!" the doppelganger responded. "Remember it!"

"Really," Neva said. "Like, really?"

"You've got some nerve trying to copy me, you faker!" Deiji said.

"Faker?!" Daisy snapped, a nervous sweat working its way onto her face.

Before Daisy could say anything more, Deiji sprinted at her and hurled a series of earthen punches. It was Nova Form against Nova Form, but in a curiously odd way. Deiji had Daisy on the ropes early and landed several hits on her, leading up into a double thrust of her Dual Earth Fists. Daisy stumbled backwards and soon caught a high-speed knee strike from Deiji in the side of her face. As Daisy fell, Deiji grabbed her and slammed her onto the ground with enough force to push her many meters through the grass and dirt.

Now without her earthly fists, Deiji laid down conventional barehanded strikes on Daisy. Each hit dug them further into their hole in the ground, and Deiji struck with intent to kill. Effectively at Deiji's mercy, Daisy got a break when the hits suddenly stopped. Bowser had grabbed Ramona's legs and dropped her into the pit, and Ramona had then latched onto Deiji. Once Ramona had her grip on Deiji, Bowser yanked Ramona up; and in doing so, they dragged Deiji back to the surface.

"You back off of my friend!" Ramona shouted, rife with anger.

Ramona jumped on top of Deiji, pinned her down under her weight, clutched her neck, and began repeatedly smacking Deiji's skull on the terrain. As violent and raging as she was, Ramona only got in a handful of repetitions before Deiji grabbed her and reversed their positions. Deiji had Ramona by her neck the next instant, ready to return the favor with considerably more force. Bowser caught Deiji right as she motioned to smash Ramona's head down, snatching her by her spiked Nova Form hair. Still with a hold on her hair, Bowser flipped Deiji into the air, where Marut rammed into her and whipped his Energized Aero Yo-yo and the electricity, magnetics, and scything winds it carried into her. Before even falling all the way out of the air, Deiji felt a handful of ice bullets pierce into her legs. The electrically-charged burst of water and heap of electrified stone that followed the ice bullets then bashed Deiji into the trees, the

momentum they passed off onto her making her rocket through branches and bounce off of tree trunks like a pinball.

A bloodied Nova Form earth wielder pulled herself out of the pit by Gatehouse Road and saw all of her friends by her side, all of them ready to aid her. "Thanks, you guys. She caught me off guard so badly."

"She caught us all off guard," Bowser said as Ramona helped Daisy to her feet. "I think we were all expecting another wielder with Nova Form to walk out of that building about as much as we were expecting to see a second you."

"Which is, like, not at all," added Marut. "What's up with that?"

"It's like she's exactly like you, Daisy," said Ramona. "But, at the same time, she seems different..."

"She's just as resilient," said Warra, pointing at the now returning Nova Form earth wielder in orange.

"Anybody got any ideas?" asked Bowser.

"As to how to beat her, or what's going on?" said Marut. "Because I don't know either one."

Deiji fully emerged from the trees and bushes, stepping into the clear area by the fence surrounding MAE Command Center. Though noticeably beaten and hurt, she appeared as though she had plenty of vitality. The prospect of fighting seven elemental wielders did not seem to intimidate her.

"Gotta love that earth wielder endurance," said Athelstan.

"Except for when you're fighting one," said Warra.

Neva chuckled and siphoned a massive quantity of her elemental power through to her sniper. "This is how much I care about someone's endurance."

Deiji noticed Neva aim her rifle at her, to which she responded with the formation of a substantial amount of crystal. Right after Neva

shot a humongous, extended bullet of electrified, magnetized ice, Deiji slammed her fist onto the ground and erected a Crystal Smash barrier as a direct equalizer. Crystal and ice scattered everywhere, no harm done to either elemental wielder involved.

"Great, she knows that too," grumbled Daisy.

Deiji showed off another move she knew when she dashed at Daisy and raised a fist charged with seismic power. Recognizing the incoming move, Daisy leapt backwards and flipped away with haste. If Daisy had done anything other than evade, Deiji's Breaker Punch would have struck her down. Just as Bowser, Athelstan, and Warra all swung their tools at Deiji, she jumped into the air and rumbled the very ground under them to knock them over. Daisy met Deiji at her apex and threw out dozens of punches and kicks as they descended, none of them connecting. None of the retaliatory strikes Deiji made hit Daisy either. Upon touching their feet to the ground, Deiji thrust her right elbow and clashed against the kick from the right Daisy made.

"Stupid faker!" Deiji yelled, grabbing Daisy's raised leg. Pulling her into a double front flip, Deiji smashed Daisy into the turf, belly down and face in the dirt. The fireballs Bowser threw pelted Deiji and set up for the mound of rock that then smacked Deiji away from Daisy before Deiji could hurt her any further. Midway through the contact with the rock, Deiji rolled and kicked it up and over her as she skidded onto the cobblestone road. She carried her momentum into a second roll that slid her out of the way of the light and air blasts Ramona and Marut sent at her. The nimble side leap Deiji then executed saved her from the frost wave and gushing water hot on her trail.

"That does it!" Deiji shouted, going airborne again. She raised her right arm, a silver Nova-enhanced aura jutting out around her in tremoring pops and crackles. The Kruna could see her seismic power undulating by her clenched fist. "I'll show you what the *real* Nova Form is capable of! How does getting buried underground sound to ya?!"

"Not cool!" yelled Daisy. "We didn't come here for that!"

"Then you shouldn't have come here!" Deiji snapped on her descent.

The Kruna Yura braced for what was to come on Deiji's landing. They expected the entirety of the ground to rip and shake apart with the amount of power Deiji produced in such a short time. Now prepared for a chaotic, earth-shattering event, the Kruna instead got something else altogether. All of Deiji's gathered power disbanded as she landed. Instead of striking the ground, Deiji had to catch herself on her hands. None of the Kruna had done anything to her in the time it took her to drop out of the air. And yet, she appeared to be in obvious difficulty. Her body trembled as she groaned and grunted without any visible cause.

Deiji's body shook even harder, violently jerking with pronounced instability throughout. Without warning, Deiji reverted out of her Nova Form and back to her normal state. Not two seconds later, her body fell apart into pieces. Literally. The powerful earth wielder now existed as nothing more than a pile of body parts, organs, and blood. With the grotesque sight now before the Kruna, an uneasy quiet returned to the area.

"What happened?" asked Warra.

"Good question," Bowser said.

Daisy frowned. "Just to be clear, no one did a thing, right? She just collapsed into that pile by herself?"

"Uh, yeah?" said Neva. "She was looking like she was about to wreck the ground up good, but she didn't actually do that."

"I wasn't trying to do anything," said Athelstan. "I was getting ready to jump."

"And I was going to fly," said Marut.

"I think we all were getting defensive," said Bowser. "So none of us could have caused it."

"Didn't the same thing happen to Andrew?" said Athelstan.

"And to Midbus," said Bowser. "Or, as he called himself,

'Commander Ginobli.' And now, Deiji..."

"But that only happened after they got hit a ton," said Daisy. "This girl just fell to pieces on her own."

"What's with people falling apart all of a sudden?" asked Neva. "Did we break something when we went through time?"

"I hope not," Daisy said under her breath.

Athelstan pulled out a diagram from his Hammerspace Belt. It was the diagram that Chrissy had left behind in Pi'illo Castle. "Warra, do you know anything about this?"

Warra took the paper from Athelstan and examined its contents. His expression seemed more disturbed the longer he looked it all over. "I think we need to find the Mother Computer," he soon said.

"So you know what it's about?" asked Athelstan.

"That's the thing," Warra replied. "I don't."

Chapter XXXVII

As the Angel's Watching:

The seven Kruna Yura passed through the heavy metal MAE doors into MAE Command Center's spacious but cramped interior. Whether because of the wide hallways and short ceilings or because of the narrow hallways and tall ceilings, just about everywhere the Kruna went felt restricted and enclosed. Though the well-lit interior did not have much consistency in the layout of its construction, navigating through it did not pose any issues. MAE emblems lined the walls in extended twin rows near the ceiling as decoration, along with many bulletin boards, promotional propaganda material, and pictures of the various MAE Learners working with employees on their creations. Compared to what the Kruna had faced en route to the Command Center, security within was scant.

"It's becoming apparent to me that MAE has run out of defense forces," Warra said as the team continued marching through the corridors. "Their presence has dropped dramatically."

"About time," said Neva. "They couldn't just keep pumping out their high-tech junk forever."

"We're still on the first floor, I believe," said Warra. "This is a building with a very wide breadth of area. You saw on the outside how part of this place is built into the hill behind it."

"So then where are we going?" asked Bowser.

"There's one room on the first floor we might find Chrissy in," said Warra. "If we don't see her in there, I suggest we just split into two as you guys mentioned you would."

"Good thing we have Warra here to help us get through this place," said Ramona.

"Yeah, it's real great having you back with us, Warra," said Athelstan. "Now, we're *almost* complete! *Almost* like how it used to

be!"

Warra gave a soft, incoherent mumble and a slight nod. He may as well have just ignored Athelstan.

"I don't know if this team will ever feel 'complete' again," said Bowser. "Who will we ever find that can replace Andrew?"

Strangely, Warra choked up some and turned tense when Bowser said that.

"Oh my damn – why'd you have to bring him up?" Neva groaned. "Can we just destruct this place and be done with all of this so we can leave already!"

"What do you mean – that was your boyfriend you were whining so much over!" said Nova Daisy.

"Not mine," said Neva. "That was all fake. He obviously didn't care about me. I don't care about him. I am now a free and liberated woman."

"Neva, I understand you're upset, but he was my friend too," said Ramona.

Neva stuck her tongue out. "Yeah, you can have him."

"We will need to start thinking about recruiting another shadow wielder soon," Warra abruptly said.

"If Commander Achlys is somewhere in here, why don't we try getting him on our side?" said Daisy.

"You think he'll actually want to side with us?" asked Bowser.

Daisy shrugged. "If we got Commander Sparrint to leave MAE, maybe we can do the same with Achlys."

"I don't like him," said Neva. "Screw that guy."

"But he's a music expert, isn't he?" said Daisy. "You two would get along fine! Maybe you could even form a band! You could sing, and

he could do instruments, and-"

"I don't like him," Neva repeated. "We don't need him anyways. We're fine as we are. We don't need anybody new. Even if we did get someone, they'd be lagging behind us."

"We'll still need another shadow wielder eventually," said Bowser.

"No, we won't!" said Neva. "Shadow is overrated. We don't need it."

"Uh, shadow brings us balance," said Athelstan. "If we are to create another, *proper* Elemental Seal again-"

"Pfft – I don't wanna hear it, whatever," said Neva.

"Warra, are you feeling okay?" asked Daisy. "You don't look like you're holding up real well."

"What?" said Warra.

"Are any of us really 'okay' right about now?" said Bowser.

"I'm talking about Warra specifically, more than us," said Daisy. "You're looking kinda shaky and ill, dude."

"Oh, I might be coming down with something," said Warra. "Maybe. I do feel a tad bit weary, but I suppose it's a consequence of a few minor exploits. I haven't had much to heal myself or recuperate with either."

"You mean to tell me you've been traveling without any healing items?" asked Bowser.

"Before MAE took hold of me, I had returned to Mekarsari and obtained special healing water," said Warra. "I was using that for ailments. Mushrooms like the ones you use aren't grown or imported into Mekarsari, although they should be. And the healing water is primarily superficial. Those Mushrooms seem to work from the inside out."

Warra stopped a few steps later and turned to his left to pass through a pair of double doors. The other Kruna followed. They

entered what appeared to be some hybrid of a darkened workshop and an office. No one was inside. They found only sections of machinery and spare parts.

"From what I remember, this is supposedly one of the places Chrissy frequents," said Warra. "But she's obviously not here now. We'll have to keep looking."

"I guess we'll split up now then," said Daisy. "How should we divvy this up? There's seven of us, so..."

"Where are we supposed to go to find the Mother Computer?" asked Bowser.

"I don't know much about it," said Warra. "But I do know it exists; and I know that it exists in MAE Command Center. I have never seen it firsthand, however. Though I know my way around some of this place, my overall knowledge of the Command Center is limited."

"Hold on," said Neva. "So we're looking for Chrissy, the Mother Computer, *and* the Universal Database, *and* the Master Pendant?!"

"If it actually flew in here," said Ramona.

"This is too much," grumbled Neva. "I'll be limping around on this bad ankle all night..."

"You'll be glad to know that the Universal Database is built into the Mother Computer," said Warra. "It's not a separate device. Well, it might be, but still directly connected and under the Mother Computer's control. Either way, they're linked together. So, unless otherwise is the case, if we know where the Mother Computer is, we know where the database is."

"Alright, who's going?" asked Marut. "Athelstan?"

"Bowser, you think you're good enough with a computer?" asked Daisy. "I have a feeling we'll need Athelstan's super strength, if not his stone wielding."

"I can go with Bowser," said Ramona.

Bowser scowled. "Hey, I know what I'm doing! Using a computer's not hard!"

"Until you get to the advanced stuff," said Athelstan. "Yeah, you should probably let Ramona go with you. Even if you don't need her help with it, it's not a good idea to go through this place alone."

"Okay," said Bowser. "I mean, if this computer is running some sort of *really advanced* software, I don't know how *any* of us would even be able to use it in the first place; but yes, going alone is a bad idea."

"Maybe the split should be more even?" said Marut. "Four to Chrissy, three to the computer?"

"Do we really need three people to one computer?" said Bowser. "No."

"Yeah, Bowser and Ramona will be fine by themselves," said Daisy. "We need as much of our power devoted to handling Chrissy as possible. Who knows what she could have set up for us. Ramona, if at any point your Motomeru is telling you that the Ankh's here or leaving-"

"Oh no, actually," Ramona cut in, her Alkemei Motomeru shining a noticeable golden light. "The Ankh's somewhere in here, for some reason. I think that means we'll have to look for *that* while we're here too after all..."

"Are you sure it's here?" asked Daisy.

"Yeah, my pendant only gets this bright when something it can detect is pretty close by," said Ramona. "That means, like, an unworn Alkemei."

"Well, if you notice any abrupt change, we're abandoning the computer search," said Bowser. "Or, delaying, at least."

"Where do we start looking for the Mother Computer though?" asked Ramona. "Where would something like that be?"

"Why don't you guys get going?" Bowser said to the others.

"Ramona and I can stay in here for a little while and scan through the room for some details."

Daisy nodded. "Alright. We'll leave that side quest to you two."

Daisy, Neva, Athelstan, Marut, and Warra exited the room and continued on through the halls. Now alone, Bowser and Ramona got to work scouting out the room. Bowser closed the doors, locked them, double-checked for potential enemies through the door windows, and flipped on the light switch. The room looked more cluttered with the lights on.

"If you can find any sort of map for this building, that would be a great place to start," said Bowser. "Otherwise, we'll pick up whatever keys we can find and just go through some floor-by-floor trial and error."

"I found a key card by this desk lamp," Ramona said, holding up a golden piece of plastic. "Wait, two – a gold and a white one."

"Hold onto them," said Bowser, heading for the workshop area. "What do they say?"

"They both say 'Laboratory Zero.' And then below that, they say, 'Restricted Access. Please provide all four cards for entry.' The black strips are on the back, with some coding and stuff."

"The other two cards aren't there somewhere?"

Ramona started going through drawers in the desk. "Not that I can see... No... I don't think so..."

"Check the ground; they might have fallen off the desk."

Ramona did as Bowser asked, going prone and searching under the entirety of the desk. "No... Nothing but dust."

Bowser scratched at his chin and cheeks. "Laboratory Zero... Those cards don't say anything else?"

"No... I guess if you're given the cards, the cards don't need to say anything...because you're expected to know what they're for."

"Well, we know there's a special laboratory somewhere in here. One that needs special authorization for entry. Now, would the Mother Computer be there, or in some computer room?"

"Um...maybe, uh- a computer lab is a computer room. But a computer lab isn't a laboratory, is it?"

Bowser sighed. "Maybe the Mother Computer has its own room."

"Would they just label it 'Mother Computer Room,' or something like that?" asked Ramona.

"Who knows," Bowser said, resuming his search through the workshop clutter. "Just see if you can find those other cards, and anything else that could give us some hints too. We might have to go card hunting if we want to check out whatever is in Laboratory Zero. There has to be something important in there if getting in necessitates *four* key cards."

The main group of the Kruna Yura moved up to the second floor of the eight-story MAE Command Center, encountering few robots and workers along the way. Soon, the workers they met greatly outnumbered the robots they ran into. Many of the workers opted to run instead of put up resistance, knowing that if the Kruna had gotten this far, they could not do anything to stop them.

Hobbling behind at the back end of the group, Neva saw a sign next to a wide pair of doors and decided to call the team back. "Hey! Come here!"

"What is it?" Nova Daisy asked, the team gathering by the doors.

"What's up with this place?" asked Neva, looking through the door windows. "That sign said 'Laboratory 2B.' Think there's anything in here?"

"There was a Laboratory 1?" asked Marut.

"We skipped past that one," said Daisy. "Unless that was the one we left Bowser and Ramona in. Did anyone read the sign there?"

"I was just following Warra," said Marut.

"Yeah, me too," said Athelstan.

"Yes, I believe that that was Laboratory 1A," said Warra. "There's no harm in checking this one, but I don't think we'll find Chrissy in there."

Laboratory 2B did not require any special keys or other means of entry security. Its doors opened once it detected the Kruna. The laboratory housed all kinds of equipment, materials, and specialized machines for advanced manufacturing. When the Kruna entered the lab, they noticed the ceiling of the room was many times higher than that of the hallway outside. They trotted towards the center of the lab and saw that it had several extra levels around its perimeter and access points to the third, fourth, and fifth floors in addition to the two on the second floor, the base level for Laboratory 2B. Strangely, the only work being done throughout Laboratory 2B's floors was through automated machines. The Kruna could just barely catch onto the sounds of MAE workers fleeing from the lab in panic.

"Look at all this stuff," said Marut. "How long have they been here working on their tech for?"

"Warra, how did they get all of this organized?" asked Athelstan. "Have they been here building themselves up in secret for years? It seems so unreal that they could accomplish all that they have in a matter of months."

"I can't say I know," said Warra. "I did not have much time of conscious awareness while I was here before I was put under MAE control. I don't have any more useful information to contribute. I'm sorry."

"I'm legit freaked out right now," mumbled Marut.

"Chrissy is a total genius, to accomplish all of this," said Daisy.

"Something this elaborate takes a special kind of mastermind," said Athelstan.

Warra pointed to the metal grid stairs on either side of the lab.

"Seems like we can use this room to move up and down levels between floor two and five."

Neva groaned. "Isn't there an elevator somewhere in here?!"

"Not exactly," Warra replied. He gestured to a glowing disk with high railing embedded in the ground by the multi-story glass window wall that gave a view of the lit up Gatehouse Road and the nighttime Twilight City skyline. The sight would have been a marvelous, enchanting spectacle if not for the Kruna's current circumstances.

The five Kruna stepped onto the sizable glowing disk, and Warra pressed a button on the control panel sitting on its railing. In a matter of moments, the entirety of the disk lifted free from the ground. Its shape revealed itself as an inverted dome that had sat in a compartment within the flooring. Now, the disk raised the Kruna over the base level of Laboratory 2B. The slow and controlled ascent it made stayed entirely vertical, bringing them to a hatch in a metal grating platform. Despite having not left the room, the control panel updated their location from Laboratory 2B to Laboratory 3B because of their overall shift to MAE Command Center's third floor. From there, the Kruna disembarked the special anti-gravity disk onto the system of metal walkways and elevated workshop sections making up Laboratory 3B.

"So if we leave this lab from this level, we'll be on the third floor of the rest of the building," said Daisy. "What's the likelihood of us finding anything important on the third floor?"

"It hurts that we don't know the layout of this place," said Athelstan. "How is there not a map somewhere?"

"There are maps on the walls," said Neva. "They just aren't specific. They'll just say directions and a bunch of room numbers, and that's it."

"We need something better than that," said Daisy. "Going floor-by-floor doesn't sound fun, if you ask me."

"Or time efficient," added Athelstan. "There's always a chance Chrissy tries to run from here."

"Why don't we just blast the building apart?" asked Neva.

"Uh, because we'd be stuck under the wreckage?" replied Daisy.

"No, let's *leave* , and *then* blast this place down," said Neva.

"Look out!" Warra yelled.

The other four Kruna watched Warra swipe a fan of water in front of them, deflecting an incoming metal spheroid. The object fell to the second floor and blew up in an electrical cloud just before touching down. Neva got her rifle up and looked through its scope to see a gray Shy Guy MAE worker ducked behind one of the tables of a distant laboratory 3B workshop. He threw another electronic grenade at the group, this time countered by a sweeping wind Marut rolled off of his yo-yo. The grenade ricocheted off of the railing of a metal walkway and blew up in midair.

"This loser thinks he's smart," grumbled Neva, centering her aim. The Shy Guy must have noticed her pointing her gun laser at him, for he eased all the way behind the table just as she shot. Neva scored no hit.

Daisy tapped Marut on the chest. "Cut him off."

Marut nodded and jumped off the walkway, flying to the far workshop opposite the great glass window wall. As Marut flew, the other Kruna raced along Laboratory 3B's elevated metal walkways to the very workshop the Shy Guy had been chucking grenades from. Marut landed at the other end of the wooden platform before the Shy Guy could flee.

"Oh, crap," the Shy Guy whimpered, dropping to his knees. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I was just trying to scare you guys off! Please don't kill me! I don't want to fight! I'm just a mechanic! I'm just here for a paycheck!"

"Sorry, dude," said Daisy. "You're gonna have to look somewhere else for a paycheck after tonight is over, because we're shutting down MAE."

"Fine! As long as I can leave in peace," said the Shy Guy, trembling.

"That was easy," said Neva. "So much for loyalty."

"You can leave when you tell us where we can find Chrissy," said Daisy.

"Floor Five, on this side of the building," the Shy Guy replied. "Administrative Office."

"Thank you," said Daisy. "Now what about the Mother Computer?"

"Mother Computer?" the Shy Guy asked. "What's that? I've never heard of that."

"How have you not?" asked Athelstan.

"I don't know everything about this organization," said the Shy Guy. "I'm just here for the job! Maybe check Floor Eight? That's the floor restricted to the higher-ranking employees. We're usually not allowed up there. Chrissy could be up there too, if she's not on Floor Five. I swear, that's all I know. Honest!"

Daisy sighed. "Let him go, Marut."

Marut lowered his guard and stepped aside to grant the Shy Guy a clear path to the doors. The Shy Guy shot to his feet, clasped his hands together, and repeatedly bowed to the Kruna.

"Oh, bless you, bless you!" the Shy Guy cried. "I am so grateful for you sparing me! I'm going straight home! Thank you so much for your forgivene-"

"Yeah, yeah – get lost already," said Neva.

Startled, the Shy Guy turned and ran for the doors. As the Shy Guy left, Daisy took out her KY Communicator to get in contact with Bowser. By the time the Kruna exited Laboratory 3B and entered the halls of MAE Command Center's third floor, Bowser answered Daisy's call.

"Daisy, where are you guys now?" Bowser asked through the communicator speaker. "Have you found Chrissy?"

"No, but we might soon," said Daisy. "Did you find out where the Mother Computer is?"

"No, but we found two key cards to something called 'Laboratory Zero.' There's supposedly two other key cards we need to find to access it. We're assuming that that could be a possible location for the Mother Computer."

"Where's Laboratory Zero?"

"We still need to figure out where it is. It's not on the first floor."

"I think the labs are labeled by floor," said Warra. "Laboratory 2B is on the second, we went up a floor and were in Laboratory 3B, and we left you in Laboratory 1A."

"Then please tell us how to get to the zeroth floor," replied Bowser.

"Maybe that just means the basement," said Athelstan.

"This building doesn't have a basement," said Bowser. "We checked. None of the stairs go any lower. The first floor is the lowest level."

"Alright, well, put that search on hold," said Daisy. "Listen – head for Floor Eight. We're going to Floor Five. You two go through Floor Eight and see what you can find there. Forget all the other floors for now; just get to a stairwell and go straight up, unless you find one of those fancy levitating disks."

"Oh, are those this place's substitute for elevators?" Bowser asked.

"Yeah," Daisy replied.

"Okay, we'll go to Floor Eight. What's on Floor Five?"

"Possibly Chrissy. We'll probably go straight there ourselves. Oh, there's a chance you might run into Chrissy on Floor Eight if we don't find her on Floor Five, so keep your head up in case you do."

"Okay. We'll try to keep you posted on what we find."

"If we don't answer, it's because we're busy fighting."

"Same on our end."

"Understood."

Daisy then shut off her KY Communicator. Nothing more needed to be said on the subject. Both parties had their work cut out for them in their searches through an expansive building they had little knowledge of.

Chapter XXXVIII

Supreme Commander-in-Chief: Chrysanthemum Sindograss:

Nova Daisy's group found little of interest on Floor Three of the Command Center other than Laboratory 3A, which was a lone lab without any connections to other floors. In there, the five Kruna Yura smuggled some experimental healing medicines from a table cabinet. Athelstan also scavenged a bunch of loose pieces and metal parts, which he stored in his Hammerspace Belt. As far as anything immediately useful, Floor Three offered nothing.

The Kruna returned to Laboratory 3B, embarked on one of the disk-shaped Elevation Platforms, and rode it to Laboratory 5B, which put them on Floor Five. Being levels that sat above Laboratory 2B; Laboratory 3B, Laboratory 4B, and Laboratory 5B all shared a similar aesthetic of separate, scattered open workshops and machines focused mostly on the room's perimeter, all bridged together with branching metal grid walkways. As the Kruna marched along the walkways, they could see through the holes in the metal below their feet the long drop down to the Laboratory 2B ground.

Floor Five had a darker, more cozy look, sporting a prominence of deep blues in the halls and couches outside of doors. True to the MAE worker's word, they did not have to go very far from Laboratory 5B through MAE Command Center's fifth floor to reach the Administrative Office. The automated double doors split apart when its sensors noticed the Kruna standing in front of it.

Much like the laboratory that extended across multiple floors, the Administrative Office possessed considerable height and breadth. The Administrative Office also had a great glass wall, this one spanning almost the entire width of the room and stretching all the way to the room's ceiling. However, this gigantic room did not branch out into multiple floors. Though there were upper levels that held cubicles, lounges, and other common workplace amenities, the Administrative Office's entry point served as its only exit.

A gold and brown carpet covered the entirety of the Administrative Office's floor, and much of the center of the room was completely clear. Most everything in the dimly-lit office sat on the perimeter of the room, including a long, tall, wide black desk in front of the window wall. Behind the same desk stood a fluffy blue chair that faced the window wall and all the sparkling lights outside along Gatehouse Road and the Twilight City skyline.

Up to this point, the Administrative Office seemed vacant. But once the big, fluffy blue chair swiveled, the Kruna knew that they had walked in on someone. In fact, they had walked in on who they sought out all along. She sat in the chair with her elbows on the arm rests and her fingertips pressed against those of the opposite hand, her expression bitterly stoic.

"Oh, you like sitting in the big chairs like a kingpin, huh?" said Daisy.

"This *is* my main office," Chrissy responded. "I don't appreciate you barging into my workplace without an appointment. Don't act like this is your friend's house."

"So, you didn't try to run away from here," said Daisy. "Surprising. You're usually on the run the instant things don't go your way."

"I am in charge of protecting this base and everything in it," said Chrissy. "I will not retreat from you. You made it here, and, I know what you're here for; so let's just get to the point."

Chrissy pressed a button on the desk and pulled a lever. Suddenly, the spacious empty floor between the Kruna Yura and Chrissy began to split down the middle...

Bowser and Ramona had went to the nearest set of stairs and were in the middle of a lengthy climb from Floor One to Floor Eight. When they got to the wide, windowed intermediate landing between the third and fourth floors, they turned the corner and caught sight of a MAE worker scurrying down in their direction. The orange yoshi in a white MAE lab coat wearing black and pink ribbons on her head shrieked and froze in place.

"Oh no," the yoshi said. "I knew I should've waited for an Elevation Disk..."

"Don't worry," said Bowser. "We're not after you. Unless you're a hardcore MAE supporter, just keep it moving."

"I'm only supporting them for as long as I have a job," the yoshi said. "But really, I feel like quitting. The guy supervising me is a total control freak."

"Well, you can either quit tonight, or get laid off when MAE goes belly up," said Bowser.

"Ooh, I'll take my leave now," said the yoshi. "I don't think I need to be around for whatever's going to happen next."

"You really don't," said Bowser.

"Righto, good luck with that," the yoshi said, hurrying past the two Kruna.

"Hey, wait," Ramona said before the yoshi got around the landing corner. "Do you by any chance happen to know Rover? Or, Max the Dog?"

The yoshi gasped. "Yeah, I know Max! You know him?"

"Yeah!" said Ramona. "He told us about you and asked us not to hurt you."

"He did?" said the yoshi. "Aw, so sweet of him, always looking out for me. I'm Jasmine, by the way."

"I'm Ramona," the Kruna of Light replied. "And this is my friend, Bowser."

"Yeah, hi," said Bowser. "Ramona, let's get back to our objective."

"Oh, I'm holding you up, aren't I?" said Jasmine. "I'm so sorry, I'll leave now!"

"Actually, hold on," said Ramona. "Can you help us find something

here?"

"That depends on what it is," said Jasmine. "I don't know everything about this place."

"Do you know about a Mother Computer?" asked Bowser.

"I think...I might have heard something of it from a passing conversation," replied Jasmine. "I don't really know what it is. I'm assuming it must be pretty important for it to be called that."

"Okay, then can you tell us what these are for?" asked Bowser, holding up a gold and a white key card.

A platform had risen out of the split in the Administrative Office floor, lifting a sizable white, black, and brown robotic eagle into the room. Chrissy flew into the cockpit in the eagle's head, powered up the eagle, closed the clear cockpit hatch, and fired up its wing engines and anti-gravity technology. As the eagle mech floated into the air in the tall, spacious room, the floor closed itself and returned to normal.

"This is the night of your eradication," said Chrissy, her voice amplified through her mech's speakers. "The Gallance Eagle Ultima Attack Robot will grant me a final victory over you barbaric troublemakers."

At the press of a button on a remote she pulled out, Chrissy's whole desk area dipped underneath a slot in the floor. A special slab of metal covered up the gap left behind. A push of a different button made the glass window wall split lengthwise and unfold outward. The structural change granted the Gallance Eagle UAR free rein to fly in and out of MAE Command Center altogether, which made sure Chrissy had as much room as possible to operate her mech.

"Oh yeah, I forgot," Nova Daisy said, shrugging with apparent disinterest. "You're not a threat to anyone unless you've got a machine helping you."

Slots opened all over the Gallance Eagle's wings, from which electric orbs soared out in curves. The move seemed reminiscent of

what Bowser's Tavado could have been if performed by an air wielder, for the orbs all spread out from their origin and curved back inward as they neared the Kruna. All of the Kruna dodged the pulsating blue spheroids, except for Neva. Marut cut in front of her to absorb the orbs that came at her into his saber and dispel the rest. However, many of the orbs splattered when they made contact with the floor and burst into branching streaks along the carpet. Despite her boosted speed, Daisy suffered multiple shocks. She was the only one unlucky enough to have electricity splash at her.

"That was kind of random," muttered Athelstan.

"At least now, we know we have to watch the floor if she does that again," said Warra.

By the time Daisy recovered, another wave of electric orbs careened their way. Marut again defended the relatively immobile Neva while the others evaded. Warra, Athelstan, and Daisy all were close to electrical discharge this time, but their awareness of the nature of the attacks gave them the edge to jump and avoid the danger.

"Neva, back up towards the door!" Daisy said.

In compliance, Neva hobbled to the office entrance and ducked behind a table. As soon as she loaded her sniper with elemental power, she flopped onto her stomach and readied her rifle's aim. She knew she could not manage much else with a bad ankle. At least from there, Chrissy could not get to her; that is, unless something were to happen to the room itself.

Chrissy flew her mech through the vacant space in the room and stopped just outside of the open wall. The Gallance Eagle's "beak" opened, from which bright purple electrical sparks fizzled and crackled. A streak of electricity shot out seconds later, zigzagging at the Kruna without a clear pattern. Marut stepped forth and caught the incoming zap on his saber, only for him to get thrown off balance but divert the attack as he stumbled and fell. With the streak coming at him, Warra put his trident in front of himself to block. The electricity reacted with the already electrically charged water he had circulating around the tool, resulting in a watery, shocking explosion that sent Warra into a convulsing tumble.

"Oh man, my bad, dude!" said Marut. "I thought I had that."

" 'Thought' is not good enough here," Warra groaned.

Chrissy swerved her mech from side to side along the width of the open office wall. "My Gallance Eagle packs substantially more wattage than any of the MAE products you've faced. These power levels are at the top of the charts!"

"What charts, exactly?" asked Athelstan.

Chrissy grumbled and activated another of her Gallance Eagle's functions once she swayed towards the center of the office. The entirety of the mech's main body glowed, as did eight spots along the ends of each of its wings. Lasers flew out of the glowing points, though they traveled slow and in straight lines. All of the lasers intersected at least one other laser, forming enlarging balls at each point of crossing. A bounty of growing energy orbs – definitely of greater number than sixteen, and still increasing – pulsed in waves, discharging power numerous times before dissipating. Daisy and Warra split to the far right of the office and out of range, and Marut and Athelstan hugged the right wall on their way to the opposite side.

Meanwhile, Neva had been taking free shots at the Gallance Eagle cockpit. Her electromagnetic ice bullets marked cracks and dents in the thick glass, messing with Chrissy's view. Despite her laser discharge attack wreaking havoc throughout most of the available space in the office, the attack did not reach any of the Kruna once they cleared away to the perimeter. Instead, she found herself hurrying to her right the moment her lasers ran their course, just to keep her mech from enduring more ice bullets.

"Stop that!" grunted Chrissy.

Neva made her already gratingly high-pitched voice excessively snobbish and nasal for her response. "Oh, shucks! The robot lady told me to stop it! I better listen to her and do exactly what she says!" To add onto it, Neva then rolled out from her cover onto her back, flailed her legs in every direction, and blew a loud, spit-heavy raspberry.

Beyond angered, Chrissy slammed a fist on a button in her cockpit. Slots opened up on the Gallance Eagle's legs, from which two egg-shaped missiles rocketed out at Neva. In an instant, Neva quit all her heckling and rolled back behind the table. Really, a table would do little to protect her from two large rockets speeding her way; but thankfully, Warra and Marut blasted charged water and electrified air in front of the missiles before they got to her. The two explosions rocked the Administrative Office, missile debris scattering in front of Neva's cover.

"Doesn't seem like she's gonna try to spare her office," Daisy said, her right fist pulled back with her Shotgun attack on standby.

"Are you sure?" asked Athelstan. "She hasn't hit anything yet."

"No, but she just launched two rockets through here," said Daisy. "There she goes again."

The Gallance Eagle twisted and soared into the center of the Administrative office, curved upwards, and hovered near the ceiling at the very top of the room. From out of a hatch...under its belly, the Gallance Eagle dropped several egg-shaped bombs all over the office floor. The Kruna scattered among the falling bombs as detonations went off one by one that left behind cracks in the floor and charred carpet. Minus the scope the explosions had, the Kruna – aside from Neva, who stayed put behind her cover – maneuvered themselves about the room without taking any harm.

"Weave," Marut grunted as he zipped back and forth between bombs. "Weave. WEAVE... WEAVE."

After a few dozen bomb drops with no success, Chrissy drove her Gallance Eagle down in a speedy, swooping dive to try ramming into the Kruna. Daisy sidestepped, and Warra and Marut ran in opposite directions; but Athelstan moved too slow and got smacked across the room with a wing of the mech into the right-hand wall. Stunned and dazed off the ricochet, Athelstan was slow to get up.

"Athelstan! Ya gotta weave!" hollered Marut.

Daisy whistled as loud as she could. "Over here, bird nerd!"

Without much second thought, Chrissy attempted ramming the Gallance Eagle into Daisy. As soon as the Gallance Eagle flew near, Daisy blasted the power she held in her charged fist at it. All the seismic force her Shotgun unleashed flipped the Gallance Eagle into a seizuring tailspin onto the office floor behind her. For as effective as the attack seemed, the Gallance Eagle rocked back into the air seconds later.

"Don't even dare say a thing!" Chrissy hissed, piloting her Gallance Eagle out of the office. "I don't need to hear your sass."

"I wasn't going to," said Daisy. "That was just too easy to do."

"I said I don't need to hear your sass!" growled Chrissy.

The Gallance Eagle flew in an inconsistent circle along the width of the Administrative office. Shortly after Warra and Marut noticed Neva sniping at the mech flying around outside, they joined in and shot blasts of their own. Daisy and Athelstan prepared to strike with their main tools the next time the Gallance Eagle drew near. However, the mech kept gliding through the air outside of the building. The Gallance Eagle executed barrel rolls, deflecting all the elemental projectile attacks that reached it as it zoomed back and forth in the sky. And as it soared, its body glowed with an animated golden hue that increased as it circulated more power to its exterior.

"There doesn't seem to be anything we can do to change her mind about things," said Warra.

"Not after all we've went through with her, no," said Athelstan.

"The way things are going now, we just need to beat her," said Daisy. "Talking won't do any good."

To the annoyance of Bowser and Ramona, Jasmine led the two of them all the way down to the first floor. They then went into the hallway perpendicular to and on the other side of MAE Command Center's front entrance, the rearmost main corridor in the building. Bowser and Ramona had already searched through the hallway,

both with the other Kruna and by themselves. However, they admitted to overlooking rooms they did not believe held anything of any immediate importance; specifically, they skipped over the *vaults.* Jasmine led them into Vault 08, the vault furthest in the back of the first floor of MAE Command Center. Together, the three stepped out of the light of the Command Center halls and into the cold and dim red-gold glow of Vault 08.

"Normally, these vaults hold MAE robots and products that have yet to be activated," Jasmine said, guiding Bowser and Ramona past stacks and rows of crates and containment units. The two Kruna saw through the glass sections of the units many of the devices and machines they had already encountered, including the types they had just confronted for the first time that night.

Still, they had deeper to go into the building. They went way back, as far into Vault 08 as they could go, until they reached the glowing sky blue back wall, where they saw a wide entrance to a long, expansive rectangular roundabout. They had yet to reach the deepest part of MAE Command Center, for the roundabout held something on the other side of the wall in its center. Though they took the left route through, the direction did not matter. In going along the roundabout, Bowser and Ramona noticed the ceiling at this part of Vault 08 consisted primarily of stone rather than actual construction. Pieces of rock and crystal also jutted out from sections of the walls and floor, as if intentionally left behind from some mining effort to exist as part of the infrastructure. The ambient glow from the walls and floor provided the only illumination for this section of Vault 08.

"The other parts of this place weren't like this," Bowser said under his breath.

"Well, close to half of this building *is* built into a huge hill," said Jasmine. "And this section that we just entered? There are no levels above it. We're just going straight through into the hills and mountains behind the Command Center."

"There's actually stuff built *this* deep into the ground?" asked Ramona.

"Technically, we don't go any lower," said Jasmine. "We just keep going deeper. Deep, and deeper...still deeper...and...here."

After turning the corner, the group saw their end of the roundabout and the other end join together into a singular path down the middle that compressed like a funnel towards a set of bolted metal doors. Comparatively unfitting for the surrounding environment, the silver and gold doors held a bright, heavenly appearance. Unlike other such significant doors the Kruna encountered, there were no cameras, spotlights, or any other embellishments aside from heavy metal grids, wings, the winged MAE Emblem to each side, four color-coded slots for key cards, and a glowing set of blue letters at the top of the frame that read "Heavenly Hall."

"Those key cards are supposed to be compatible with the doors here," said Jasmine. "But I don't know what's on the other side of it. I don't know how far back it goes. I'm not authorized to be inside of Laboratory Zero. Only people like admins, and The Learners, and other big, important people like that are even allowed to have the set of key cards needed for entry; and they're given four for security measures. You know, so that someone can't get in with just one if they steal it or find a lost one."

"But these cards say 'Laboratory Zero' on them," mumbled Ramona.

"There's no other place I know of in here that requires four whole key cards," said Jasmine.

"Do you know where we could find the other key cards?" asked Bowser.

"You'd have to take them from someone," said Jasmine. "Though, maybe you can check the admin-only Floor Eight. Someone could have left theirs in one of their offices, or they could have spares lying around. That's another place workers like me aren't allowed to go, but we do get to go up there sometimes. Heavenly Hall, we don't get to go there at all."

"Alright, we can take it from here," said Bowser. "That's all we need from you. Thanks for showing us around."

"And thank you so much for the information," said Ramona.

"You're totally welcome," said Jasmine. She turned to walk away. "Well, I'm gonna be going now. I'm not sticking around for overtime if this place won't even be here tomorrow. Hope this helps out! It was nice to meet you! Good luck!"

Once Jasmine scurried back through the roundabout, Bowser and Ramona were alone once again. Only the dull hum from the doors and the glowing walls and floors broke the silence when they could no longer hear Jasmine's footsteps. The low white noise sounded like distant wind. They could not tell if the Heavenly Hall doors, aside from what seemed to come from the doors themselves, were soundproof.

"This is scaring me," murmured Ramona.

"This does feel really out of place," said Bowser. "But it's not like we haven't faced some weird and unsettling things before."

"So reassuring," grumbled Ramona.

"Alright, we go up to Floor Eight, hopefully find the other two key cards, and come back here," said Bowser. "That is, if the Mother Computer isn't on Floor Eight. But at this point, I'm convinced that it's beyond these doors. If not the Mother Computer, then something."

Ramona frowned and shivered. "My Motomeru's really acting up right now..."

"Then that means the Ankh's somewhere close, doesn't it."

"Mm-hmm..."

"It has to be out here somewhere...unless someone had opened the doors recently and it snuck through."

For a somewhat lengthy period of time, neither of them said anything. They kept glancing around the area, all while Ramona's Alkemei Motomeru glowed and throbbed without ceasing. But at no point did the Ankh show up anywhere. Even after a long stretch of

standing still, Ramona's pendant stayed just as active.

"Never mind it," Bowser said. "We can't wait here forever. We've got things to do. Let's go."

Ramona nodded. "Okay..."

Chapter XXXIX

The Judgment Room:

"Get a load of this!" Chrissy yelled.

The golden glow around the Gallance Eagle UAR reached its peak, at which time Chrissy piloted it back through the opened wall of MAE Command Center into the Administrative Office. None of the five Kruna there expected Chrissy to slam her mech's feet down onto the office floor the way she did then and there, especially not with the room-shaking force she used. Waves of energy pillars erupted and slid out from all around the Gallance Eagle, ranging in speed and size from slow and short to quick and thick. Aside from Neva, who continued using the table by the office entrance for cover, the scattered Kruna maneuvered and evaded the pillars that came their way. As a product of his exceptional speed, Marut dodged with anything but difficulty.

"Ooh, take *all* of this air!" taunted Marut. "Can't handle this weave game, huh?"

All the energy pillars the Kruna dodged crawled along to the ends of the rooms and crashed against the walls. Neva again shot electric and magnetic ice bullets from her rifle, only for the Gallance Eagle to leap out of her aim and land in front of Marut. With a quick wind up and lean forward of her mech's torso, Chrissy executed a barrage of ultra fast wing swings. Averaging no less than five massive metal wing swipes per second, the Gallance Eagle's rapid melee attack seemed effective – until Chrissy realized that Marut was dodging every single one of them.

"Weave game too strong, h-what?!" said Marut.

Chrissy growled. "Shut up!"

In the middle of the flurrying wing attack, Nova Daisy and Athelstan chained together a hardy combo on the Gallance Eagle's back. Athelstan first scooped his hammer underneath of the Gallance

Eagle to lift it into the air, and Daisy jumped and smashed her drill staff onto the mech to send it speeding back onto the office floor at a near-horizontal angle. The Gallance Eagle bounced several times before colliding with the wall and almost rolling off of the opening to the outside. Warra, Marut, and Neva then opened the floodgates and blitzed the Gallance Eagle with Volt Fusion-enhanced elemental bursts. Their combined assault forced the Gallance Eagle off of the edge and into a long five-story fall to the world below. The Kruna heard the sound of a loud, booming thud, then nothing but silence afterwards.

"Is that it?" asked Athelstan. "Did we win?"

"Neva, stay by your cover," Daisy said, beginning a slow advance to the edge the Gallance Eagle had fallen off of.

Bowser and Ramona rode one of the special Elevation Disks from Floor One all the way up to Floor Eight, traveling through a vertical tunnel of glass that gave them a view of a good portion of each of the floors as they passed them. After passing Floor Seven, their tunnel transitioned into opaque metal. The sparse, dim golden lights within reflected off of their eyes on their way to their stop, where a set of doors opened through the tunnel and granted them passage to a level dominated with silver, blue, and dark red hues. Both Kruna had a feeling that they had entered a deserted floor, for they heard nothing other than their own footsteps, the low hum from the Elevation Disk, and the closure of the tunnel doors.

Ramona stopped in front of an electronic plaque and read off from the map it displayed on its screen. "Suites 800-808, to the left. Suites 809-816, keep right. Floor Eight Office Lobby, 800. Learner Team Room, 802. Brainstorm Room 803. Print and Copy Area, Smoking Deck, Lactation Room... Where should we look? *Judgment Room* , Suite 808 – now that sounds like a place *not* to go. What kind of office-headquarters needs a judgment room? What even is that?"

"I'm tempted to look out of curiosity," said Bowser.

"Wait – right here, it says there's offices in 800, see? Office 800A, 800B, C, D, E, all the way up to G. What if those are designated offices for The Learners?"

"What if that Judgment Room is one big office for The Learners? Or better yet...that could be Chrissy's office."

"You think so?"

"Sounds like it to me."

"But aren't the others fighting her in her office three floors down?"

"Did they say it was her office? That could just be another place she is often in, or she could have more than one office. Maybe the Judgment Room's where she fires people."

"You can have your own room just for firing people?"

Bowser started walking left down the hall. "If you're the head of an organization, you can basically do whatever you want. So if she's so self-important that she feels like she needs an office just to fire people, there's nothing stopping her. Regardless, I'm gonna see what's in there. There has to be something pretty significant in there for it to be called a Judgment Room, if there's actually anything special to its name. You're welcome to look elsewhere. We've got communicators."

"You mean...split up?" asked Ramona. Exhibiting no further hesitation, she caught up to Bowser. "No, I think we should stick together. It'd be better than going alone."

"Okay. 808, right?"

"Huh?"

"The Suite."

"Oh, yeah. I think."

The two Kruna marched along the checkerboard-tiled center of the hallway until they reached the grandest set of doors down that side.

A tag to the left of the doors read "Suite 808," while "Judgment Room" sat emblazoned on a decorated silver banner at the top of the frame. An off-balance elliptical of glass stretched across the design of the two brown metal doors, built into them but cut off where the doors separated. Neither door had any handles. They opened inward when Bowser and Ramona stood in front of them.

What the Kruna walked into was an office that would have made the label of unconventional an understatement. A darkened room with two walls that consisted of almost nothing but windows, chandeliers and futuristic ceiling light orbs provided all visibility for the room through ambient lighting comparable to that of an art studio. The square, cathedral-esque windows straight ahead of the two Kruna showed Evershade Valley's mountains, hills, and trees; while the windows all along their right leaned out and away from the building as they rose. The lean the right-hand windows had did not distort the view of the glowing, sparkling Twilight City skyline.

Wide and curved comfort chairs occupied the main area that took up most of the center of the Judgment Room. A meeting table and taller seats sat by the tilted windows. Further up ahead, a handful of steps bordered with slight ramps led to the raised back of the room. The back section housed a tall and wide desk far on the left, while two lines of white couches facing each other stretched out from the corner where the cathedral windows met the leaning windows. Cybernetic designs lined the non-window walls, each aesthetic element and electronic tracing glowing a faint gold color.

"Oh yeah, this just has to be Chrissy's main office," said Bowser. "I don't see anyone else owning a room as grand as this one."

"It's a neat office," said Ramona. "I kinda wish I had an office like this."

"Don't we all," Bowser said. "Let's start looking around."

Daisy, Warra, Marut, and Athelstan gathered at the edge of the retracted wall in the Administrative Office just in time to see the Gallance Eagle rush right past them from below. Rather than reenter

the office, the Gallance Eagle soared into a large loop away from the building. When its maneuver leveled-off, it entered a corkscrew twist on its way back through the open office wall. The Gallance Eagle flew with enough power to emit a shield of energy around it as it bulldozed into the four Kruna Yura and scattered them across the room. Once well inside, the Gallance Eagle cracked out of its twist and curved upward until its momentum slowed to a still hover.

"It's about time you received your judgment," said Chrissy.

The Gallance Eagle deployed more of its egg-shaped bombs throughout the vast office, floating from corner to corner and across everywhere in between to catch the scrambling Kruna in explosions. Each time a bomb burst, the room vibrated. Where multiple bombs exploded, cracks in the floor developed.

"Didn't you already try these bombs?" Marut called up. The only one having an easier time dodging than him was Neva, who stayed behind her cover. Warra might have one upped everyone, jumping at a bomb and using his trident – along with precision hand-eye coordination and body awareness – to curl it with him into a full-body spin that whipped it back into the air. Though the redirected bomb did not hit the Gallance Eagle, the timed explosion that went off disrupted the mech's flight and halted its release of more explosives.

Daisy crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. "Ooh, someone's getting fancy."

"That better be the best book in the world you're reading," Bowser said to Ramona as he picked through the drawers of the Judgment Room's window-side desk. Not long after they had started searching the room, Ramona had snagged a book behind the same desk's computer and sat down on one of the nearby couches with it opened in her hands. She had largely forgone scouring the room ever since, favoring scanning through the book.

It took going through every other drawer the desk had first, but Bowser caught sight of a swift flash in the bottom-most left drawer when he motioned to close it. On impulse, he pulled the drawer back

out and dug through the office supplies and gadgets within to find a full set of key cards. In addition to several key cards for other rooms in MAE Command Center, the keychain card stack Bowser pulled out of the drawer had all four cards needed to access Laboratory Zero.

"Look! All four cards!" said Bowser. "So the ones we didn't have actually were the blue and brown ones... Okay, let's go get a quick glance at the rest of this floor just to be sure we don't miss anything important before we go all the way back down."

Ramona gave a muffled grunt in response. Her eyes did not leave the book she had in her hands until she turned the page. Only then did she peer at the key cards Bowser held.

"Hey, what *is* that you're reading?" Bowser said. "I get you're a book nerd and all, but this isn't appropriate right now."

"It's...it's someone's journal, or diary," said Ramona, tilting the cover of the book she had at Bowser. The title-less cover featured a twilight sky in the background behind a bouquet of flowers. Chrysanthemums made up a majority of the bouquet. "I think it's Chrissy's."

"Why would she have something like that?" asked Bowser. "Couldn't she just write her journal in a computer? All this technology, and she's gonna go the old-fashioned pen and paper route for that?"

"Diaries and journals can have some private and personal stuff. Just about anyone can hack into a computer or network and steal information. Can't hack a book. I'm sure that's why this isn't digital."

"Anything of note in there? Or you just like snooping through someone else's stuff?"

Ramona disregarded the second part of the question, so much of her focus on the journal instead. "I've been skimming through it for a while to see if there is. There was this one passage here, early on... It's something...well, I'll let you judge for yourself. Here, I'll read it off. It says, 'I must never forget why I undertook this revolution. Aria Esme, you were stripped from me too soon. My darling angel, you

deserved to live longer than you did. If I knew what would have happened, I would've rescheduled our date. But I should've known that it was a possibility. If it wasn't those two elemental wielders, it surely would've been a different duo. Their kind has brought nothing but misfortune to me. Because I could never be as good as them, they believed they had the right to treat me and everyone I associated with like insignificant garbage. I am so sorry our love made you vulnerable to them. I swear by the Order of MAE, no one will have to suffer at the hands of those savages ever again. Every last elemental wielder is a demon and a cancer to society...' "

"Aria Esme..." murmured Bowser. "That's the first time I'm hearing that name."

"I'm thinking that that must've been Chrissy's boyfriend," said Ramona. "Or girlfriend. I don't know. Aria's one of those names like 'Morgan' and 'Alex,' where it could be masculine or feminine. But anyways, a little further down, it just says this as a single paragraph to end the entry: 'I am now a Metal Angel of Earth. I am the prophet of a new era. It will be an era devoid of all elemental wielding.' "

Bowser walked over to Ramona and leaned in to get a look at the cursive handwriting in the book. "Is there anything else in there? Like, a Mother Computer mention?"

"Well, there was this," Ramona said, flipping pages ahead. "I just gotta find it..."

Neva kept sniping at the Gallance Eagle as the mech released more curving electrical orbs throughout the office building. Most of Neva's shots failed to elicit a positive effect for the Kruna, for Chrissy raised her mech's wings in defense whenever she knew she had been stationary for too long. Chrissy also had to contend with Daisy's and Athelstan's chasing and repeated swinging of their weapons at her, as well as Marut's and Warra's blasts. Order melted down under the increasing pressure of growing chaos as the conflict became a frantic back and forth between mobile parties. While Daisy, Marut, Athelstan, and Warra all took up an active offensive effort, Chrissy steered her mech away from trouble and launched electrical orbs on

the go.

With as much going on as there was, avoiding friendly fire presented as much of an issue for the Kruna as did dodging the Gallance Eagle's careening orbs. Chrissy's Gallance Eagle moved through the available space in the Administrative Office and beyond the open wall with great speed, showing no slowing of her attacks. The more the Kruna dodged, the more the office suffered instead.

"WEAVE," said Marut, sidestepping a handful of electrical orbs. "WEAVE – yo, your office is getting wrecked, you know."

"Whatever it takes...to extinguish you!" shouted Chrissy.

Now in addition to firing off electrical orbs on the go, Chrissy added missiles from her mech's wings to the mounting mayhem. The Kruna's job became that much harder, and more of their efforts shifted towards defense and self-preservation rather than attacking. And yet still, Marut played it all off as a non-issue and further egged Chrissy on with his clownish taunts and goofy midair mannerisms.

"Marut!" Athelstan called up. " *Ixnay* on the *sauce-nay!* "

"You said what now?" asked Marut.

"Stop taunting her!" snapped Warra.

Marut sucked his teeth. "Man, whatchu mean; this girl crazy."

Warra snuck a diving roll into his run as four electric spheroids swooped in low at him. As he resumed running, he caught sight of Daisy flipping into the Gallance Eagle with her drill staff extended to strike. The momentum of her spin gave her enough force on contact to swat the Gallance Eagle out of the air, only for the mech to sweep back upward before hitting the floor. But for the moment, Daisy's connection put an end to the chain of electric orbs and missiles from the Gallance Eagle.

"Fighting for a cause is anything but crazy," said Chrissy, preparing more of her mech's functions. "We can quickly rebuild what is lost. A necessary sacrifice, if it means killing you off!"

"Right here," Ramona said, settling on a page to read off from. " 'Society is about to experience the full potential of MAE. I have already demonstrated proficiency in cybernetics, robotics, and other related scientific innovations. But these mechanical and technological advances are secondary and superficial to the bioengineering I have tried to advance, a secret field of study I have had to keep hidden for a long time. Those fools deemed my practices and trials as immoral and inhumane, but they are too shortsighted to understand that this is the next step for evolution to grow upon. Of course my processes are imperfect, but they will be honed in due time.' "

"Bioengineering," mumbled Bowser.

Ramona continued reading from the book. " 'Among these; replication of organisms, an experiment to create a perfectly symmetrical lifeform, the first prototype builds of hardware and software designed for synthetic creation and fusion, and planning and research done to engineer superbeings have been prime points of emphasis...' "

Ramona flipped through the pages some more. "So, actually, it goes on for a while about the details and science of all that stuff, seemingly for personal reference; but then, it leads to this here...: 'My ultimate project is operational. It houses data on nearly all organisms that walk the planet. This monumental device can craft man-made lifeforms and clones. Though the process is not perfected, I will continue to work on it and update it so that this ultra computer's applications may one day yield 100% true, *exact* copies and creations. The advanced artificial intelligence featured prominently in the computer has granted it independent thought to make it capable of self-moderation of itself and its extensive Universal Database. This enables it to automatically gather and extract data from the reconnaissance tools and modules spread throughout the planet without manual input from myself or The Learners. The wireless nature of the data extraction, assimilation, and replication means that this, the Mother Computer, can constantly take in new information to perfect the accuracy of its archives and stay up to date on most everything that develops on

the planet. *I* will have to keep up to date on its archives personally, for there is a good chance it could record data that I myself may not even know of. There is still much to learn from this world. So, so much to learn. This machine is the key to all of MAE's ambitions and future successes, and it will only continue to improve with time...' "

Bowser looked up to make sure no one was at the doors. "Keep reading."

Chaos continued unraveling in the Administrative Office, for Chrissy had unveiled a new, much more deadly and precise attack her Gallance Eagle possessed. Each Charge Shot energy pulse that oozed from the rounded spikes of the top of the mech's wings shined a deep, burning red and sizzled with extreme amounts of power, as Athelstan, Warra, and Daisy found out the hard way when the pulses zoomed at them. Neva stuck to her crumbling cover, and Marut was the only one that had the speed to cut past the homing Charge Shots.

Deceptively small, the Charge Shots elicited immense pain; not enough, however, to force the Kruna into submission, for Marut occupied Chrissy long enough for the three downed Kruna to reenter the fight. Chrissy had kept her Gallance Eagle in a constant state of swaying to throw off the magnetized lightning gusts Marut cast, but that proved ineffective when he increased the scope of his bursts. The charged winds rocking the Gallance Eagle, all of Chrissy's available Charge Shots that had yet to be fired scattered throughout the room and added to the structural carnage. Before Chrissy knew it, she then had Daisy, Warra, and Athelstan all rushing at her to attack, with Marut and Neva providing ranged support.

"Die already, damn wielders!" yelled Chrissy, swinging her mech up towards the ceiling.

"You really don't care about your office, do you?" shouted Athelstan.

"Her office?" snapped Neva. "Try the whole building, at this rate!"

"This office will be your grave, wielders!" shouted Chrissy.

"How can it be our grave if there's nowhere to bury us?" asked Athelstan. "Do you have another secret hatch under the floor, or were we just going under the carpet?"

"Shut up!" Chrissy screeched. "Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!"

The Gallance Eagle hurried out of the office through the open wall and gathered power around the entirety of its form. When the mech gained a beaming bright gold hue, it entered a series of aerial acrobatics. Chrissy picked up more speed out of each maneuver she executed.

"If you ask me, it looks like she's getting ready to try ramming into us again," said Daisy.

"If you ask me, she is losing it," said Athelstan.

"If she comes back through here at that speed, she will crash," said Warra. "She won't be able to turn fast enough in any direction to avoid crashing into something."

"That could be her intention, to crash," said Athelstan. "I wonder if...maybe she isn't going to..."

"Going to what?" asked Warra.

Athelstan rubbed at his facial scruff. "Uh, I'm thinking about the possibility of her bypassing us altogether and aiming for...basically anywhere above us."

"That sounds like her trying to crash the upper floors down on top of us," said Warra.

Daisy perked up, her eyes flaring as wide as they could go. A tense frown on her face, she began readying her Laser Drill Staff with seismic energy. Electricity and magnetic forces flickered off of the rumbling silver shockwaves her Volt Fusion tool harbored and magnified.

"Yeah – I'm wondering if she'd actually try something like that," said Athelstan. "You never know with these MAE people."

Warra grimaced and circulated power into his trident. "Bowser and Ramona are likely above us right now. So if a kamikaze-type attack is her next move and it's destructive enough to make the building cave in, they're getting caught too."

" *Can* this place cave in?" asked Marut. "I thought this was built into a hill!"

"What can, will," said Warra, setting up to lunge ahead at the open wall. "Let's not wait to find out if and what."

But before Warra made a break for it, Daisy sped past him. The Nova Form earth wielder got both of her hands on her humming drill staff and lifted it over her head, drill angled downward. She stopped just short of the edge to give her a running start off of it.

"Daisy, let me do this!" demanded Warra. He dashed to the open wall at the same time Chrissy veered her mech back towards the Administrative Office. Right away, Daisy recognized when the Gallance Eagle locked its flight into a beeline for the office's open wall. The Gallance Eagle spiraled at them with its golden aura of energy twisting along with it, accelerating as it neared the building.

Under normal circumstances, Warra would have been the one most capable of accurately judging and anticipating the Gallance Eagle's trajectory based on its shrinking distance and closing speed. He hoped to pass Daisy and challenge the Gallance Eagle himself, but Daisy reacted first. She ran to the edge and long jumped, poised to strike the incoming mech in a situation that presented an incredibly low percentage chance for success. She had no margin for error, especially considering she had nothing below her but hard ground five high stories down.

Out of the apex of her horizontal leap, Daisy played a game of what amounted to an extreme variant of baseball. She swung her charged drill staff down at the speeding robotic eagle flying her way, only one strike on hand to hit the pitch. But she jammed her staff onto her target just a hair too early, resulting in a booming clash that rocketed her and the Gallance Eagle in opposite directions. The Gallance Eagle fluttered out to Gatehouse Road, while Daisy spun into the side of MAE Command Center. Her drill staff flopped high into the

air, which Marut flew to and snagged before it fell all the way to the ground.

As for Daisy, she tumbled down the side of MAE Command Center in a dazed state several times before stopping herself halfway down the outside of Floor Three. Through the use of her Crystal Grip, Daisy latched a hand onto the outer wall of the building. While she clung to the wall, she saw the Gallance Eagle save itself from crashing by way of a shaky last-second swerve upwards. With as much as Daisy felt herself hurting, she saw that Chrissy's mech endured significant mechanical damage.

Chrissy grabbed at her hair and screamed in maddened, frustrated fury, clearly audible through her mech's speakers. "I am getting so sick of you! Why won't you just die?!"

" '... I will have to keep the cloning restricted to a tenaciously-controlled limit,' " Ramona read aloud. " 'So far, the clones have shown a before unseen instability to their build. So much as even slight blunt trauma has caused great injury to them. In some cases, they have even fallen apart, in the most literal sense imaginable. I don't understand what the problem is, unless there is instability in the genetic encoding themselves? An issue with telomeres? This must be at least buffered – if not fixed altogether – before clone production gets the okay to enter more mass usage.' No further writing on this page."

"Right side," Bowser said.

Ramona nodded and read from the page on the right. " 'It seems the problems continue for the cloning apps. In making clones, the advanced aging process that matures the clone to the age listed in the Universal Database has glitches. The Mother Computer has not yet learned to properly slow down the aging process after the designated maturity corresponding with the original's data has been reached. Clones are not lasting much longer than a month before passing away, some even dying of age before they start to age. The maturation process must be perfected so that accelerated aging stops after the clone has reached the recorded age, and the speed

of aging must then be restored to normal at that point. It seems both of these problems will require a gradual process of fine tuning to fix. Thankfully, there have been no other glaring issues to report. Hopefully, it stays that way.' "

Once Daisy felt the pain subsiding, she rocked her body up, flipped, and again clung to the concrete MAE Command Center outer wall. She then repeated the tactic a second time. With the added height Daisy gained on the jumps, Athelstan could now reach down for her and pull her up. Marut landed next to them and tossed Daisy her staff once she got her feet back under her. Towards the left side of the Administrative Office, Warra still had his trident up and charged.

"That was crazy, Daisy," said Athelstan.

Marut pointed at the hovering eagle mech in the distance, where Chrissy's groans and wails of frustration sounded off from. "Not as crazy as her."

"That's not the sound of craziness," said Daisy. "That's the sound of having something you've put so much work into and been so invested in crumble and fail. She must have been through a helluva lot to build MAE up to everything that it is today...but now that she's faced with the possibility of it all ending tonight, she's freaking out. She's watching all of her goals and ambitions slip out of reach, and she knows it."

"But she's not showing any change of heart," said Athelstan.

"Because she's just that driven," said Daisy.

A cannon of electrically-charged water shot off from the Administrative Office and struck the Gallance Eagle, followed by a string of charged ice bullets. Daisy, Marut, and Athelstan turned and saw Warra readying another water burst as more ice bullets flew by from Neva's rifle. Strangely, Chrissy did not appear to be dodging any of the bursts. Instead, the Gallance Eagle flew closer to the office as it endured Warra's and Neva's attacks and began flashing a bright gold and red pattern.

Upon noticing that Chrissy did not avert her Gallance Eagle's direction, Warra stopped blasting and erected a Tidal Wall in front of him. Though smoking and sparking considerably, the Gallance Eagle's body held up on its way back into the office. It soared over Warra and concentrated its gathered power into its feet just before slamming a hard landing on the office floor. Shock waves crashed through everything in its blast radius, a radius that took up almost the entirety of the room and compromised its structural integrity to a substantial degree. But it seemed as though the incredible attack was all for not. The waves mostly stretched on a horizontal plane; and while Neva had some semblance of far away cover and Warra had his Tidal Wall absorb the blow, the other three Kruna there had jumped at the Gallance Eagle the instant it hit the floor.

Once Chrissy got one look at Daisy's Crystal Kick in mid-formation, Marut's Lightning Blade, and Athelstan's raised hammer, she opened the hatch to her cockpit and jumped out, knowing she herself would get caught if she tried to save her mech too. As Chrissy hit the ground rolling, the three-hit finisher effectively put an end to the Gallance Eagle. Daisy's Crystal Kick hit low and flipped the mech into the air, Marut's Lightning Blade attack zapped the mech, and Athelstan's hulkish Mountain Hammer swing bashed the mech onto the floor with crushing force. Just seconds after settling on the floor, the Gallance Eagle collapsed and fell through the spot under which it crashed. It plummeted onto the floor below, wrecked and coated with rubble.

" 'It has been so long since I have lost her, I almost wonder if I am starting to forget what she looks like,' " Ramona read. " 'Maybe I forget who she even was, but I know for sure that I will never forget our love and the way she made me feel. Yet with so many unsuccessful clones, getting her back seems more and more beyond my grasp as time passes. That's despite each clone getting closer to what she was. And even then, how am I supposed to be sure that I have made the perfect clone when my memory of her is dwindling with each passing day? Is it just not meant to be? I refuse to accept that I will never see her again. At this point, that is my lone purpose in life."

"What, is she talking about that Aria person again?" asked Bowser. "Is she?... Ramona? Hey?"

Ramona seemed utterly spooked as she read the next entry aloud. " 'I have finally done it. This clone is a 99.36% exact match to Aria Esme. She looks like she did, acts like she did, has the same skills and likes, exhibits the same level of intelligence, and even shares some of the same memories. She will be christened 'Chrysanthemum Sindograss.' Chrysanthemums were Aria's favorite flower. She would often take them and stick them in her hair. They were also the last flowers I gave her, on that very day she died and on the day of her funeral. Now, the Mother Computer has produced a near-perfect clone. Aria has finally been reborn.' "

Chrissy rolled over and pressed herself onto a foot and a knee. When she got her hair out of her face, she saw the great gaping hole in the office floor through which her Gallance Eagle had sunk into. Smoke and sparks billowed out from the hole in earnest as the mech rested in a totaled pile on the floor one story down.

Once standing, Chrissy puffed her chest up and clutched at her head with so much exaggeration that her reaction seemed disingenuous. "Eek-ghad! Not my Gallance Eagle! How could this happen, MAE can not lose, stupid elemental wielders, etcetera, etcetera, whatever – I'm just going to-"

"Oh no you don't, Chrissy!" Nova Daisy yelled, running after the now fleeing MAE commander.

Now genuinely distraught and fearful, Chrissy sprinted for the open office wall. She activated the hover function her boots had and got to within a handful of meters away from the edge before Daisy grabbed her by her collar and slammed her onto the floor. After a fit of frenzied gasping, Chrissy tried in vain to break from Daisy's hold on her.

"No! Stop!" shouted Chrissy, wriggling in panic. "Please don't hurt me!"

"Lay one on her, Daisy!" yelled Neva. "A hard one! Right across her snobbish, preppy face!"

Daisy smirked and raised a fist. "Maybe just one, since you just tried to run away. Again."

"PLEASE DON'T – NO!" Chrissy screamed. The subsequent cries she let out sounded primal, desperate, and beyond loud, eliciting awkward uneasiness in all five Kruna there.

"Man, what's up?" said Daisy, alarmed. "Can't take a hit? Then what are you doing trying to fight us? If you're gonna fight somebody, you better expect that you'll get hit at least once."

"Unless you zero-to-death somebody!" Marut called out.

Chrissy began whimpering and shedding streams of tears, still trying to escape from Daisy but slowly losing the will to struggle. "I don't wanna... Please...no, I don't...I can't...not like this... I'm not ready for this! This...this is too soon! I can't! Please, not again...not today..."

Daisy's hold on Chrissy weakened. "What...?"

"Whose book is this?!" Bowser asked, now starting to glance around the room. " *Whose office* is this?"

"Not Chrissy's, and not Chrissy's," said Ramona. "Should I keep going?"

Bowser thought about it for a moment, letting out a confused grunt. "Just a little more. We really have to get moving."

With haste, Ramona flipped ahead a couple of pages, scanned it, skipped ahead again, scanned, skipped a few more, scanned, and settled on something that caught her attention. " 'Chrissy has been a pure delight to have around. She is exactly like Aria used to be, and she loves me just as Aria did. However...I don't know if I love her the way I loved Aria. I don't know how it could be, but Chrissy seems...empty somehow. Something's missing. What it is, I have yet to figure out. It is becoming more evident and clear as time

progresses that perhaps she may not be the true, definitive clone I originally thought her to be.' "

"You know what – just take the book with you," said Bowser. "We've wasted enough time in here."

"Are you sure I should?" Ramona asked.

"No, I'm not, actually," said Bowser. "But there may be something more in there. Whoever it belongs to seems to know a lot about the inner workings of what's going on here..."

Chapter XL

Heavenly Hall:

"I don't wanna die..." Chrissy mumbled as she cried. Nova Daisy held her down to the Administrative Office floor by the base of her neck, as perplexed and unsettled as the other four Kruna Yura there, who all gathered nearby. "I'm not ready...this is too soon... I've worked so hard for this..."

"Geez, lighten up," said Daisy. "You're not gonna die from one hit, not even if I put all my strength into it."

The mere mention of such a possibility made Chrissy cringe and shrivel into a shivering, tearful shell of her formerly proud self. For the defeated MAE commander to have undergone such a dramatic turnaround from angered ambition moments ago left the five Kruna feeling more awkward about the situation than triumphant. It seemed as though the more time elapsed, the deeper Chrissy fell into despair.

"Listen to her, crying like a baby," muttered Neva.

"I'm not supposed to feel bad about someone trying to orchestrate genocide," said Athelstan.

"Bruh, she thinks she's gonna die if she gets punched," Marut remarked. "I say she's overacting and is just tryna get us to let her go."

Daisy sighed. "Then let's see what happens."

Daisy got off of Chrissy and let go of her. Chrissy's crying slowly died down to muffled sniveling. Curling herself inward to hug her legs, Chrissy rolled onto her left side and trembled.

"Did we do something wrong?" said Athelstan.

"I think we broke her," said Marut.

"Finally," said Neva.

"I hate...all of you," Chrissy mumbled. "You...you ruined everything..."

"You do realize that the motives behind your actions are what brought us here," said Warra.

"Shut up, water wielder," grumbled Chrissy. "I saved you...you're alive because of me. I should've known a wielder would turn on me like this-"

"Oh my gosh – STOP with the constant wielder-blaming already!" hissed Neva. "Do you *want* to get smacked around?"

"Do as you will," Chrissy said. "You wielders all will always be demons despite whatever disguise you try to put on. Even if MAE crumbles, the world will figure it out soon enough."

"You're the one that wants to kill every wielder," said Daisy. "What about the guise your whole organization has been putting on?"

Chrissy scowled. "A necessary evil. And the lesser of two."

Daisy shook her head. "I can see that nothing we say or do will change your mind about any of this."

"You're set in your ways," said Chrissy. "I'm set in mine."

"Then just tell us a few things before we get you turned in and your whole operation shut down," said Daisy.

"Like what?" said Chrissy. "You think I'll tell you anything? No."

Daisy grabbed Chrissy again and raised a fist. "I don't believe I'm strong enough to kill someone in one punch, but we can always find out."

"Go ahead," said Chrissy. "Prove what you are. Prove it to the whole world. Exercise your power over me. Turn destructive and murderous when you don't get what you want."

Daisy smirked, her raised fist tightening. "I *was* feeling just a little sorry for you."

The doors to the Administrative Office opened. All five of the Kruna turned and looked at the doorway. Chrissy did as well, seemingly surprised with the appearance of a man at the office entrance.

Bowser and Ramona stepped off of an Elevation Platform after it had lowered them to MAE Command Center's first floor. The whole time they rode the platform down from Floor Eight and backtracked to Vault 08, Ramona had her eyes fixated on the chrysanthemum-decorated journal they took from the Judgment Room. Neither Kruna had a clue as to who the book belonged to, other than it could not have been Chrissy's.

"We're almost to the Heavenly Hall doors," Bowser said as they entered Vault 08.

"Guess I'll put this away then," said Ramona, looking up from the journal.

"You should," said Bowser. "We'll need full focus on our surroundings. It'll just be us two in unknown territory."

Ramona nodded. "Right."

Bowser stopped when they reached the deep rectangular roundabout beyond the rear of Vault 08. "But before we go in, is there anything else worth mentioning in that book before you put it away?"

"Like what, exactly?"

"Anything that might be important to note about the Mother Computer, or what might be in Heavenly Hall if the Mother Computer isn't?"

"Oh, well, not really anything that seems noteworthy. Nothing like that, but..."

"But?"

Ramona opened the journal and flipped to a page three-fifths of the way into it. "This: 'Now I see. Chrissy is lacking the one thing essential to Aria's very being – and that is her *soul* . The nature of these clones and their sentience escapes me. But now, I know one thing for sure. No clone will ever be a 100% identical recreation of Aria, unless I can also recreate Aria's soul...but such a feat is impossible... I'm sorry, Chrissy. But you will never be Aria. No matter how hard you try, you will never be her...' And then, the next page is just this one paragraph... 'Those damned elemental wielders. I hate them all. They have ruined my life far too much. Even if I can't bring Aria back, I will ensure that each and every single elemental wielder receives their judgment. I will never forgive them for treating me like a doormat and for taking away my perfect angel. They will fall. Every last one of them...' There's...there's not...there's not much written after all of this."

Bowser nodded. "Okay..."

"Unless, you want to look through it..."

"No... I think at this point, we just need to open up those doors and see what we find inside..."

The new man approached Chrissy and the five Kruna Yura with a crazed, fatigued scowl. A lean and lanky man in white pants, brown boots, and a white lab coat all featuring the MAE emblem, he had long, scraggly brown hair and a headset with goggles that he lifted from his strained blue eyes when he stopped moving. An odor of oil, grease, and chemicals followed him in.

"Hey, who are you?" asked Daisy.

"And what is up with that smell?" asked Marut.

"Well, it's not Neva," Athelstan said. "She showered last week."

"Yeah, how 'bout I backhand you into last week?" said Neva.

"Technically, I didn't say anything bad, according to you," replied Athelstan.

"Chrissy!" the new man yelled. "I thought you said you had this all under control!"

Chrissy wormed free from Daisy, who stopped putting effort into holding her down. Hurrying to the man, Chrissy frantically waved her hands in front of her. "I do! I do! Er- I did; but, thank you for checking on me-"

"You let them get into our Command Center and cause pandemonium!" the man hollered. "Did you forget that I am working just down the hall?! I can not have these barbaric plebeians interrupting me with their chaos! They better be eliminated within the next half hour! I've got testing to do before closing the lab!"

Chrissy nodded. "Yes, Doctor-"

"You're the leader, the commander-in-chief, the Head of The Learners!" the man snorted. "I can not be bothered with your duties while I am busy in the labs! There is far too much to do! Take care of your business, like you are supposed to!"

Chrissy again nodded. "Yes, I know-"

"You have all the power in this organization, and yet these wielders are still breathing?" the man went on, glancing at the huge hole in the office floor. "And what is *that* from? Why do I see fragments from the Gallance Eagle UAR?!"

Marut raised a hand. "Oh, because we trashed it!"

"Silence, you fool!" the man snapped. "I am reaming out my colleague right now!"

"Oh, right, okay," mumbled Marut.

"Now you get this situation under control!" the man said to Chrissy. "You were not elected to your position to fail! We have too much at stake for setbacks and failures! Do you understand?! You better understand! Our success depends on your victory over these

invaders! *Do not let us down* ."

"Doctor, wait!" Chrissy pleaded as the man turned away. "Didn't you see them on me when you came in? I can't stop them! I've been trying to get rid of them, but they keep besting everything I've put them against!"

"Nonsense!" the man replied with a laugh. "We have forces too numerous and machines too powerful for these wielders to handle!"

"Yeah, no – we cleared out all those forces already," said Neva.

"Quiet, you!" the man shouted at the Kruna of Ice. "I don't have time for you! Chrissy! Get back in that Gallance Eagle and exterminate these wielders! Don't play any more games with them!"

"But, but, Doctor-" Chrissy said.

"Exterminate them!" the man shouted, heading for the doors. "Don't argue with me! Just do it already!"

"Um, doctor dude?" Daisy asked.

"Not now!" the man snapped. "I will not speak to you peanut-brained roobs! I'm busy building and engineering new technologies!"

"Doctor!" shouted Chrissy. "They... You should show them what you're working on! They'd like that!"

The man put his hands on his hips and chuckled. "Of course they would. I am the best there is when it comes to technology. Who wouldn't want to see my brilliance at work!"

"Exactly!" said Chrissy. "Enlighten them a little! Show them what the world would be losing in shutting MAE down!"

"An interesting thought," said the man. "Very well, wielders. Perhaps I could bless you with a glimpse of some of my works in progress before you are destroyed."

"I guess it couldn't hurt, could it?" said Daisy, shrugging.

"I say we just tie them up, wreck the place, and be done with it," Neva grumbled. "I'm not trying to stand on this ankle all night."

Warra caught the man flash a cryptic stare at Chrissy. Despite some personal alarm and suspicion raised, Warra stayed quiet.

"How funny," said Chrissy. "You wanted answers to questions two minutes ago. This could be your opportunity to get those answers."

"Questions about MAE, not about this angry guy's work," said Neva.

Chrissy gasped and scowled. "This is Doctor Gabriel Ezhno, not a random angry guy. And he is the main driver of MAE's growth. MAE would not be where it is without his outstanding work. He is on another plane, compared to you hoodlums."

"Agreed," said Dr. Ezhno. "You're nowhere near close. Come and bear witness to manufactured innovations that rival the *divine,* so that you may see for yourself what I am, what MAE is, and what *you* are."

"Will you tell us what we want to know?" asked Daisy.

"Sure..." Dr. Ezhno replied. "There's nothing to hide from a group of people that will be dead soon."

"You can't be serious," grunted Neva. "You're actually threatening us?"

"No, he's not," said Chrissy. "He's stating facts."

Neva gave a slow clap. "Bravo, stupidos. We're the ones with the wielding power, and you're just a couple of wimpy nerds. But yeah, we'll be dead."

"You're not the ones in control here," said Dr. Ezhno.

"Oh, and you are?" asked Neva.

"Of course we are!" said Dr. Ezhno. "How could you think otherwise?"

"This guy has to be delusional," Athelstan mumbled to Marut.

"I heard that!" Dr. Ezhno snapped. "You're the delusional ones, but you'll realize that soon enough!" He marched out of the office and turned right. "This way!"

Once Bowser and Ramona reached the security doors barring entry to Heavenly Hall, Bowser took out the four special key cards and placed them in their corresponding slots. Ramona noted her Motomeru acting up again, but she still could not find what her Alkemei detected. A brief but pleasant sounding melody played as the key cards ejected from the slots moments later; and the doors unlocked, split open down the middle, and slid away from one another.

On the other side of the doors was not a hall. A long, wide ramp leading up stood beyond the doorway, the ground paved over and mechanized while the walls and ceiling – much like the area immediately prior to the doorway, but with more vertical space – maintained the earthen and stony structure of the hill MAE Command Center had been built into. In the low lighting, a glowing plaque at the left side of the start of the incline read, "Sometimes, you have to go through Hell to get to Heaven."

"Whoa..." Ramona mumbled, mouth hanging open at the long expanse ahead.

"Not what I expected to see," Bowser said, already advancing up the ramp.

Ramona followed, the two of them walking with cautious quickness. "How far back does this go?"

"Depends on how far up this goes, I think," said Bowser.

The higher they went, the more bright the lighting of the ascending corridor shined. Ramona's Motomeru dimmed as they progressed. Before long, they reached what appeared to be an end; only to find that it was just a short section of level flooring that careened into a

u-turn. Their path continued upward, consisting of many more similar corners. It was as if someone had multiplied a staircase's size several times and filed the stairs into an even slope.

Seven u-turns later, the two Kruna started up a short final incline that led into the opening of a grandiose hall. The hall they entered melded divine aesthetics with futuristic, metallic construction. The bright, golden electric torch lights illuminated the predominantly white, silver, and beige floors, ceiling, and walls. And yet, for as majestic as the hall appeared, there existed only seven well-spaced doors; three on the left side, three on the right, and one double-door set centered at the other end of the hall.

"Unreal," murmured Ramona. "To think this was all built into a huge hill behind a building built into the same hill... I mean, we're still in the hill, right?"

"If we don't come across any windows, I would assume we are," said Bowser. "But we are *way* deep into it."

Ramona let out a deep exhale. "Heavenly Hall..."

"Only seven rooms..." said Bowser. "Seven rooms to check. We're either going to hit pay dirt here, or come out of this empty..."

Dr. Ezhno, Chrissy, and Nova Daisy's Kruna Yura group entered Laboratory 5A, a massive, windowless engineering room that stretched up to Floor Seven and had a similar layout to Laboratory 2B-5B. Most of the heavy machines and equipment used for production sat on the main floor of the lab, while Laboratory 6A and 7A above were spread out and scattered among sections of islands connected with railed metal grid walkways. Unlike Laboratory 2B-5B, Laboratory 5A-7A appeared devoted solely to mechanical work and building. The Kruna noticed at various abandoned workshops many copies of robots they had previously faced, as well as new creations that had yet to reach completion.

"To think that you still haven't the awareness of what it is exactly you're campaigning to stop is asinine," Dr. Ezhno said, maneuvering

around a nearby table. He lifted onto it a pair of wheeled shoes with neon azure lights running through the material. "Without MAE, there are no Hoverskates! Convertible shoes-to-skates technology, for all-terrain *and* no terrain! Adapted for grinding *and* drifting!"

"Oh, sick!" Marut hollered. "I want some of those!"

"Exactly," said Dr. Ezhno, lobbing the pair of Hoverskates to Marut. After surprisingly giving Marut Hoverskates, Dr. Ezhno pulled out a chair and sat in it. "Without MAE, there would be no Automized Seat Push-In Units!"

A skeletal utility robot stood by the wall behind Dr. Ezhno. When Dr. Ezhno got up and walked away, he did not push his chair back under the table. Instead, the utility robot activated, rolled to the chair, and pushed it back in itself. The robot then wheeled back to its spot and shut off.

"Able to sense when there is no weight bound to chairs and chair-like instruments," said Dr. Ezhno. "No more annoying slobs scattering chairs all over the room!"

"Okay, now, you gotta admit – that's pretty cool," said Athelstan.

Dr. Ezhno spun a large, cylindrical, vented device with bright red lights interwoven into its design onto the table, the object maintaining its rotation on its smoothed base. "Without MAE, who would come up with Air-to-Energy Power Cells? With options to convert either nitrogen, carbon dioxide, or even water vapor into electrical power? I suppose *these* certainly wouldn't have any utility anywhere on this planet under any circumstances or scenarios, would they?"

"All those developing nations sure couldn't benefit from them," said Chrissy. "Never mind a source of backup power for people whose main power has gone out for whatever reason, hmm?"

Dr. Ezhno led the group to the main table in the back of the lab, opened a drawer, and pulled out what appeared to be a bandage packet. After rolling up his right sleeve, he ripped open the wrapping and applied the silvery bandage to his arm. The bandage glowed

with a dim but luminous green.

"Without MAE, you'd be stuck using primitive recovery items," said Dr. Ezhno. "The world would not see these Body Rejuvenation Patches for years, if that! These would not have even completed development! And yet, you want to do away with an organization planning to put them out on the market next month! Oh, why would anyone want cost-effective, more efficient, thorough healing? All the people whose lives are on the line and whose bodies need aid in surviving – no, you don't want that, do you?"

"We, we didn't say that," Daisy replied.

"Your actions said that for you," spat Dr. Ezhno. "Just like wielders to only look out for themselves and their selfish interests. Of course, you wouldn't want something like this-"

Dr. Ezhno revealed a remote-like gadget with a protruding spherical head. At the press of a button, the device lit up and buzzed with power. He aimed its now glowing head at an inactive Wingweaver Disrupter Unit, and it fired a bubble-like beam at the machine. The Wingweaver lifted off of the floor, no longer bound by gravity but by the grapple of the blue light flowing out of Dr. Ezhno's gadget. By pressing the directional pad on the gadget and twirling the analog stick, Dr. Ezhno could move the bound Wingweaver in every direction on the three-dimensional plane.

"You don't think a Matter Dominion Controller would be beneficial in any way?" asked Dr. Ezhno, directing the Wingweaver around some more before setting it back where it was. "This device allows us to move past the need for extreme physical exertion and mechanical force in manipulating objects. The more powerful versions will be able to work heavier things through a broader range of operation; but DAMNED be the people who made this a possibility. Do you realize how stupid you look yet?"

Before anyone had a chance to respond, Dr. Ezhno pressed a button on his electronic wristband that activated a system of levers on a conveyor belt stationed over Laboratory 5A. The levers brought to the side of the table a gold and black exoskeleton that resembled an angelic, robed being with segmented, bladed wings, a sword

arm, a bladed crossbow-shield hybrid arm, and pulsating neon blue pieces throughout the torso and limbs. As Chrissy ducked behind a row of containment units by the right-side wall for cover, Dr. Ezhno hopped into the ten-foot-tall exoskeleton and secured himself into the control seat in its torso. When he powered up the exoskeleton, he showcased some of its swift and precise movement capabilities. The exoskeleton swiped through the air with great, speedy force, demonstrating wide and fluid, unhindered range of motion throughout its joints. Its neon portions glowed with increasing pulse and shine as more power built up within.

"That's why I'm not even going to let you get the *chance* to undermine our work," said Dr. Ezhno. "Now that the presentation is done, we can proceed with responding to those questions of yours. I'm sure I have sufficient answers for all of your queries."

Chapter XLI

Technological Harbinger of Evolution: Dr. Gabriel Ezhno:

Dr. Ezhno's Metal Saint exoskeleton leapt into the air of Laboratory 5A, an electrical charge building outward from its sword-arm. The five Kruna Yura there could not recognize the move as anything other than a show of hostility, so they scattered and readied their guards. From behind the cover of containment units by the outer edge of the room, Chrissy looked on in silence.

"I knew we should've just bound them both back in the office!" yelled Neva. "Five of us around these two weak asses? C'mon, man; we could've skipped this!"

Dr. Ezhno laughed. "How could you expect anything else? Did you really believe I would walk into that office without a plan? I am four steps ahead of you, three steps to the right, and spinning counterclockwise!" He pointed his exoskeleton's charged sword-arm at Neva. "I noticed you've been limping around, ice wielder."

The shocking zap that Dr. Ezhno shot at Neva met a seismic-electromagnetic rush that followed the swipe Nova Daisy made with her drill staff when she dove in the way. Following the successful defense, Neva only needed a quick and direct head bob from Daisy to know what Daisy wanted her to do. Neva hobbled away, backpedaling to a far table and tumbling underneath it. To some of the other Kruna, it almost looked as if Neva's mobility had further deteriorated. Sweat drenched the Kruna Yura of Ice's anguished face and body. She could feel weight and fluid in her swollen, injured right ankle, all made worse from the images and sensations of Kokoro from earlier that night flashing in her brain.

Dr. Ezhno revealed from his lab coat a spherical glowing metal ball with golden holes. "And if you had refused to play along, then I had *this* for protection."

The device in Dr. Ezhno's hand powered up and emitted a force field around his body. When he transferred the tool to the conveniently-

shaped hatch under where he sat in the Metal Saint, the force field expanded around the entire exoskeleton. The force field also synced with the Metal Saint's power.

"I did indeed design my Metal Saint to be compatible with Insta-Shields," said Dr. Ezhno. "All of the maximum power levels for your energy signatures have been estimated and foiled with this Insta-Shield's defensive capacities. Not a single one of you will overpower it, let alone break through."

Daisy raised her Laser Drill Staff and shook the room with mounting seismic energy, electricity, and magnetics. Following a flip of her staff, she jumped at the relatively low-hovering Metal Saint and struck it with as much force as she could muster. For as much power as she generated in her Nova Form state, none of it amounted to anything other than a flicker of the Insta-Shield surrounding the Metal Saint. As soon as she landed, Daisy went on the defensive and rolled out of the line of the sword swing Dr. Ezhno smashed onto the floor.

"The less you resist, the quicker this will end," hissed Dr. Ezhno, distributing extra power into his suit's bladed crossbow-shield. The Metal Saint's wings flapped as Dr. Ezhno leaned the exoskeleton from side to side.

"All of this over elemental wielding," said Athelstan.

"This is for evolution!" Dr. Ezhno yelled. "And the most important thing for advancing the world into a better future is your demise, wielders! Proof enough, by your own hands, with what you've done to MAE!"

Daisy frowned. "Maybe if you knew what a majority of wielders are like instead of overgeneralizing based off of all the bad ones, we wouldn't have had to tear through your territories and storm your HQ."

"Don't stand there trying to promote or defend those archaic, barbaric practices," said Dr. Ezhno. "Your elemental arts benefit the villainous more than anyone else, and they attract nothing but delinquents and future criminals. They're just powers that get

misused on a daily basis. And on top of that, they're inefficient. All the productive work that elemental wielding can accomplish can be done in a more streamlined, labor-saving, and all-around more effective manner using the latest advancements in technology and mechanics. So not only are your powers outdated, easily misused, and physically exhausting; but they are simply not needed any longer."

Golden arrows of energy rained down from the Metal Saint's crossbow, a threatening attack but nothing extraordinary. The chain of arrows tracked towards the Kruna Yura in a line; specifically at Daisy, as evidenced when the Kruna scattered from the nearing projectiles. As the arrows hit the floor, they each jammed into the concrete and remained upright for a half-second before dispersing a short radius from its striking point. Dr. Ezhno held his fire when Daisy ducked behind a row of tall canisters.

From her cover, the Nova Form earth wielder materialized a Crystal Fist. "I'd much rather rely on myself over some dumb machine!"

"And so what if lots of people misuse elemental wielding and do bad stuff with it?" said Marut. "Technology can be abused too!"

"Ah, but a major flaw is immediately present in plain sight," said Dr. Ezhno, swaying through the air as he picked a new target. "Only competent wielders can misuse the elements and be a danger. If someone's abusing technology, anyone can use technology to fight back – especially MAE-brand products, which are only of the highest quality of electronics and machinery. If a powerful elemental wielder has turned wicked, people are at their mercy unless a second proficient and powerful elemental wielder can counteract them."

Dr. Ezhno veered left and shot off a sweeping streak of seven energy arrows in Marut's direction, then another seven at Warra. Both Kruna slipped behind equipment and containment units. Though not crowded, Laboratory 5A provided plenty of cover for the Kruna if and when needed. When Dr. Ezhno tried to shoot at Athelstan, the Kruna of Stone spun behind a row of inactive Valkyrian Guardians as Warra jumped out from his cover and blasted electrified water Dr. Ezhno's way. Warra's attack proved ineffective once the Insta-Shield activated around the Metal Saint.

"Are you still blind to the issue?" said Dr. Ezhno. "I bet you wouldn't be if you lot did not possess the power that you do. But for the rest of us in the world who could not stand up to your kind – which is plenty more than those who can – I have now evened the playing field. Your run is over."

Daisy peaked out from her cover to check where the Metal Saint had flown to. At its current position, the Metal Saint was too high up for Daisy herself to reach with a lone jump. But she noticed that it had, at least for the moment, stayed near the wall behind it. She saw then that she had a chance to attack while Dr. Ezhno readied more arrows. Through the use of her blazing ground speed, she dashed at the hovering Metal Saint, breezed by under it, leapt at the wall, executed a wall jump back at the Metal Saint, and swung her Crystal Fist in a powerful downward diagonal. Unfortunately for her, the Insta-Shield activated the instant before she contacted the Metal Saint. Instead of scoring a hit, Daisy flopped back to the floor following her Crystal Fist's clash with the spontaneous shield.

Dr. Ezhno's shield receded at the instant he targeted Daisy and shot his suit's arrows at her. The attack would have easily struck the downed Kruna had Warra not launched a timely, continuous water burst overhead of her that caught and washed away all the arrows. Daisy recovered just as Dr. Ezhno dove at her with his Metal Saint's sword twisting and spitting electrical sparks as he swung it at her. Though she dodged the strike itself, the stray electricity zapped her into an awkward backpedal.

"Elemental wielding has tarnished history ever since the recording of history itself!" Dr. Ezhno yelled. "Nearly every crisis, on a national or a global scale, every great catastrophe brought about on civilization; the root cause of it, more times than not? Elemental wielding. We are behind as a society in evolution because the trials and tribulations wielders have caused have either made us stall or set us back! You tell me how erasing you power-mad savages wouldn't benefit this world!"

A flurry of charged ice bullets soared at Dr. Ezhno, only to meet failure. All of the many projectiles Neva fired while flat on her stomach under her table cover bounced off of the Insta-Shield as the shield formed. The ice bullets dispersed their energy and

disintegrated on contact.

"Little baby gun shooting pebbles," said Dr. Ezhno. "Laughable! Even your technology is primitive!"

"These 'pebbles' fly fast and hit hard!" yelled Neva.

"Then explain what just happened," said Dr. Ezhno.

"Might take at least two of us attacking together to get through that Insta-Shield," said Warra.

Daisy whipped her left arm down and snapped seismic power around her fist. "Do you think that will work? He said that shield can handle any max power effort from us."

"Hey, he didn't say a thing about when we combine our powers!" remarked Athelstan.

Daisy smirked. "That, he didn't."

Marut and Warra grouped together by one row of machines near where Neva lay, all three of them readying elemental power around their tools. As Daisy built up more seismic energy, Dr. Ezhno positioned his Metal Saint's sword on his crossbow-shield. The Metal Saint stayed mobile through the air and generated power, some of it repulsing and escaping through the physical contact of the two weapons.

"I have studied your data and techniques extensively, Kruna Yura," said Dr. Ezhno. "Your capacities are nothing short of intriguing. Quick recovery and even quicker rates of improvement are not commonly seen, not even close. You eight genetic anomalies have provided an interesting perspective to base my works off of."

Athelstan rubbed at his beard. "Genetic anomalies...?"

"Unfortunately for you, that is where your usefulness terminates," said Dr. Ezhno. He raised his exo suit's arms and flew to the Laboratory 7A ceiling, arcing into a dive back to the 5A floor by the general area where the Kruna had their cover. The electrical shockwave that resulted when the Metal Saint landed with its arms

striking the floor rattled the entirety of the lab, in addition to disrupting all of the Kruna's collective elemental preparation. Dozens of machines and containment units toppled over, greatly reducing the options for safety the Kruna had.

However, Warra's Pendant of Concealment revealed upon deactivation the Kruna Yura of Water leaping and swinging his trident at the Metal Saint. Despite the surprise attack, the Insta-Shield still activated the instant before Warra struck. Spinning off of the recoil traveling through his unsuccessful hit, Warra fell to a backwards stumble but twirled out of it into an attacking stance. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw Daisy and Marut both advancing at the Metal Saint with their primary tools up. They sped at Dr. Ezhno and his exoskeleton, Marut's saber and Daisy's drill staff combining into a near-simultaneous smash that the Insta-Shield blocked with minimal issue. Dr. Ezhno dished out a counter when his Insta-Shield went down as Daisy and Marut tried to regain their balance following the hard clash, the Metal Saint's arms whipping around and bashing the two Kruna in opposite directions.

Warra spun his trident and relit it with electrified water. "Elementals, elementals!"

"You're the one that just tried a melee attack too!" snapped Daisy.

"To test that energy shield's reaction," said Warra. "Looks like it's automatic, so a sneak attack doesn't do anything extra here."

"A sneak attack?" taunted Dr. Ezhno. "You think I didn't account for that? What moron do you take me for? I have an IQ of over six hundred and sixty-two!"

"Who cares about IQ?!" hollered Neva.

"Hush, you!" barked Dr. Ezhno. "Unleash your ghastly mouth while you're *not* cowering under a table, and someone *then* might take you seriously."

"Just stay put Neva-" Daisy called out when she saw Neva attempt to crawl out from her table cover.

"Man, screw this ankle!" Neva grunted, forcing herself out into the open. She knelt on her right knee, taking pressure off of her throbbing injured foot by shifting her weight onto her left leg. While she aimed at the mobile Metal Saint and charged her tool, Warra intensified the charge he held on his.

Dr. Ezhno flew high to the lab's ceiling, seemingly attempting to create another shockwave. The Metal Saint moved with a significant speed increase compared to the last time around, for it took only seconds to ready itself and execute the diving, laboratory tremor-inducing blow on the floor. Most of the machines, constructs, and equipment still standing in the laboratory flopped over. Chrissy rushed out from behind her collapsing cover and sprinted to a table by one of Laboratory 5A's entrances.

"You're setting my work back a whole day!" screamed Dr. Ezhno. "I'll have to spend copious amounts of time reorganizing this laboratory once I'm through with you! Don't you realize how much progress gets missed out on when one day of work is lost?!"

Neva had dropped her rifle and got on her hands and knees just to make sure she maintained her balance during the great shake that the Metal Saint's impact had produced. On her left, Athelstan and Marut shrugged miscellaneous lab objects off of them as they got back to their feet. She looked to her right and saw Daisy clinging to a far wall with one hand and circulating seismic power into her other hand. Warra had demonstrated masterful technique in jumping to the top of a stable but complex piece of machinery built into the floor, and he had managed to maintain his tool's charge in the process.

"You and me, Warra!" Daisy shouted, springing off of the wall.

Warra nodded and leapt from his perch, his trajectory centered on the rising Metal Saint. Both attacking Kruna landed and transitioned into jumps at the ascending exo suit as they unleashed elemental strikes; Daisy in the form of her Shotgun blast, and Warra through a shocking wet stream. Though their attacks did not perfectly come out in sync, their combined efforts yielded a positive result. A half-second after Daisy's seismic power provoked and hit Dr. Ezhno's Insta-Shield, Warra's blast struck the shield and exhibited extra

force and pressure on it in tandem with Daisy's burst. Through the synergistic overload the two Kruna induced, the Insta-Shield gave out entirely, which paved the way for the remnants of their attacks to splash, shake, and zap Dr. Ezhno and his exo suit.

As soon as Warra's feet touched the floor, he moistened his trident with more water. "Not bad. Most of it didn't get through, but at least we exposed him. I'm thinking we just need to put more power into our attacks."

Daisy sprinted across the room upon landing and unlimbered her drill staff, ready to call forth seismic power that her staff would electrify and add magnetic pull to. Probably more shocked that his Insta-Shield failed than from the actual attacks that hit him, Dr. Ezhno reeled about in the air longer than he should have, granting all five of the Kruna some extra seconds to generate elemental power.

"What?!" Dr. Ezhno screamed. "How did you... Chrissy! Are those Universal Database readings up to date?!"

"They should be!" Chrissy shouted.

"It's called 'teamwork,' mecha-doofus," said Daisy. Right when Neva thrust her charged Chill Sickle, Daisy launched the power gathered around her Laser Drill Staff. The wave of electrified, magnetized ice pounded Dr. Ezhno's Insta-Shield when it activated, only for the inclusion of the charged seismic energy from Daisy to degrade the shield again. A more plentiful amount of elementals then bashed Dr. Ezhno, and Marut's lightning-laced Gust Boomerangs sweeping in late into the mix swatted Dr. Ezhno and his Metal Saint down low to the floor. Athelstan combined his Volt Fusion-enhanced stone energy with Warra's electric-buffed water into a chunky blast of mayhem that punched through Dr. Ezhno's Insta-Shield as it tried to reform, bringing heavy damage to him and his exo suit.

While Dr. Ezhno tried to shake off his daze, the five Kruna Yura shifted throughout the room and called forth their elemental abilities once more with their elemental tools. They noticed that the added electrical and magnetic boost the Volt Fusion tools provided seemed to do an extra number on the Metal Saint, for they could see

flickering sparks buzzing out from all over the exo suit as its limbs twitched and spasmed.

"Oh, so there *might* be some limitations with my shield after all..." said Dr. Ezhno. "It's not like I had the ability to run tests with such extreme parameters, but oh well. This changes nothing!"

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Really? We can overpower your auto-shield-"

" *Insta-Shield* – get it right, plebeian!" Dr. Ezhno snapped. "This will be a patented product!"

Athelstan punched the floor, his Crush Gauntlets breaking chunks of marble debris loose. "I'm gonna try pounding him hard the next time you guys create another opening!"

Dr. Ezhno zipped into a tight, swooping dive with his exo suit's sword and bladed crossbow-shield stretched out to his sides. He targeted each of the Kruna with his aerial tackle, first missing Daisy, then missing Marut, then Warra; but he grazed Athelstan and caught Neva in the back as she tried diving out of reach. Before Dr. Ezhno could loop back around and fly at Neva again, Daisy and Marut propelled themselves at him. Daisy's drill staff met the Metal Saint's sword, and Marut's saber clanged with the Metal Saint's crossbow-shield, the momentum of all three slowing to a halt with both Marut and the Metal Saint hovering off of the floor.

The Insta-Shield activated as Warra sprinted forth and attempted to smack his trident onto Dr. Ezhno while Daisy and Marut had the Metal Saint stationary. Daisy tried to impose her strength on the Metal Saint, as did Marut, their efforts putting pressure on the exoskeleton and the Insta-Shield. Neva grimaced, her rough night made tougher with the cut high on her back; but she stood up and chilled her rifle with more ice.

Right around the time Dr. Ezhno activated more propulsion in his suit, the combined force from Daisy's, Marut's, and Warra's charged tools put a strain on the Insta-Shield, even with the Metal Saint's weapons offsetting some of the Kruna's power. At the sound of loud cracks and crashes, gunshot impacts showed up one after the other

all over the Insta-Shield. Nine of Neva's buffed ice bullets combined with the other three Kruna's pressure demolished the Insta-Shield, but Dr. Ezhno reacted quick enough to get himself out of trouble. The instant after his energy barrier broke, he flung himself and his Metal Saint suit up skyward to clear out of the reach of Daisy, Marut, and Warra.

And yet still, Dr. Ezhno had not completely escaped scot-free. Athelstan had his sight locked onto the saintly exo suit, waiting for his chance to strike. Once the Metal Saint rose following its shield break, Athelstan swung his charged hammer at the chunks of floor by his feet. His swing mimicked a golf drive, and his tool transferred some Volt Fusion power into the marble debris on contact. Even after he launched the stone, Athelstan exercised some control over the debris to keep most of it on course at the vulnerable Metal Saint. Showing off some veteran skill, the Kruna Yura of Stone even made minute adjustments on his projectiles as the Metal Saint's ascent speed slowed.

By all accounts, Athelstan's attacks should have pummeled Dr. Ezhno and the Metal Saint. Instead, no contact occurred. All of the debris scattered around the Metal Saint and flew by it, crashing into the walls and machines past the exoskeleton. None of the Kruna could understand what had just happened. They could not question Athelstan's precision, and there were too few seconds for the Insta-Shield to have reloaded itself. Nothing could have prevented Athelstan's attacks from striking the Metal Saint, nothing at all.

Nothing except for Dr. Ezhno's raised hands, something the Kruna noticed when the Metal Saint slowed to a still hover. Though what had just happened did not click in any of the Kruna's heads right away, Warra was the first to catch on. Then Athelstan and Daisy figured it out as well. Neither Neva nor Marut understood Warra's frustration, Daisy's sudden anger, or Athelstan's disbelief; but Dr. Ezhno knew what the three Kruna had found out. He knew before they even realized what had happened, for the very action of saving himself gave it away.

Bowser and Ramona exited the fifth of the six side rooms in

Heavenly Hall. In addition to more bizarre, surreal technologies they saw in the rooms, they encountered extensive stockpiles of medical equipment. They did not run into anyone else in Heavenly Hall during their search, though much of the medical equipment was left on in most of the rooms.

The two also noticed that each room had "Laboratory Zero" followed by a dash and an extension number from 1-6 on a plaque by their respective entrances. Laboratory Zero-6 was the last room to check before entering the final set of double-doors at the Heavenly Hall terminal. So far, they had not found anything they could identify as the Mother Computer; but the surprising amount of medical equipment in the previous rooms made them question the purpose of this secret hidden portion of MAE Command Center.

Their confusion and discomfort peaked when they entered Laboratory Zero-6, the largest of the six rooms they had checked so far. The vast majority of the darkened room consisted of two dozen mobile clinical beds. When they turned on the room's lights, they noticed that all but two of the beds were barren. The two odd beds out had messy sheets and discarded sanitary dressings. One bed had an unidentifiable liquid soaked into its sheets that reeked of a metallic, basic odor.

"What do you make of this?" Ramona asked.

Bowser shook his head. "Is this a hospital section? No, that can't be – why would this place be so deeply hidden? And locked off from the rest of the center?"

Ramona sighed, jittery and unnerved. "Maybe we won't actually find the Mother Computer anywhere in here, if this is some medical sector."

"There's only one way to find out. But I want to know why there's no one in here right now, both this room and the whole of Heavenly Hall."

"Maybe because no one needed medical help?"

"Then... Hmm... Okay... Tons of medical equipment, but no one

here-"

Ramona gasped. "No, wait – this is, this all has to have something to do with cloning! The Mother Computer can make clones! That's why this area is locked off! It's an area they want to keep secret, for work on cloning!"

Bowser perked up. "Which means..."

The two Kruna left the room and continued to the end of Heavenly Hall, where the corridor fanned out into a circular opening embroidered with divine, cathedral-esque decorations. Artificial golden illumination shined through the glass-like walls, mimicking sun rays that could not otherwise beam into the hallway. When Bowser and Ramona reached the double-doors into Laboratory Zero-7, the doors split apart and opened into a spacious room with ceiling lights that automatically turned on upon their entry.

A few tables spread in the center of the room and a number of sizable chambers and tanks distributed all along the room's perimeter took little focus away from the main feature dead ahead. An angelic, cylindrical metal structure twice as tall as Bowser stood in the very back of the room. Dual-sectioned, top-heavy wing-like slabs jutted out from either side of the cylinder, connecting into the wall, secondary devices, and nearby fluid-filled containment units through several thick cables. The predominantly white, blue, and brown machine had numerous neon gold sections in its build, including a prominent golden, elliptical orb towards the top of its body, as well as a series of panels wrapping around its base in a shape faintly resembling an elongated crown. The neon lights pulsated as if mimicking a slow, sluggish heartbeat.

The golden orb at the top of the winged structure almost seemed to stare down Bowser and Ramona. To the two Kruna's surprise, the machine talked seconds later. It spoke with a realistic human intonation and dialect, but its voice sounded anything but organic. "Awakening from sleep... Low power-mode shutting off... Good evening! How may I be of service tonight?"

Chapter XLII

Prelude to Chaos:

"You hypocrite," Nova Daisy said. "A stone wielder the whole time..."

"You've been wanting to get rid of us all, when you're a wielder yourself," said Warra.

"Oh, wait until *this* gets out," said Neva. "I bet we're in the clear once this leaks."

"Can you believe this guy," said Athelstan, a grimacing smirk showing.

"This is pretty lame," muttered Marut.

"So what if I am a wielder!" yelled Dr. Ezhno. "My abilities are insignificant. I pose no threat using any wielding."

"That's not the point," said Daisy.

"You're the worst kind of scum," said Warra. "Let me guess – you found difficulty with wielding and gave up trying to get better, is that it? Has this whole campaign for the change you seek been one of jealousy and envy?"

"Oh, too much of a wimp to even try to get better," said Neva. "You wanna take out being sucky on us, huh? Real nice."

"Anyone can get better if they try," said Athelstan. "No excuses. Honestly."

"You're really just mad at everyone else because you're not as good?" asked Marut.

"You think I didn't try?" growled Dr. Ezhno. "I did! For far longer than I should have! The cold truth of it all is that some people are born more gifted than others. It's so easy for *you* to say such things because it just came to you better. But me? Hmph. I had to scratch

and claw for what little I could get, and it borderline wasn't worth it. You bunch of elitists can go ahead and keep acting like everything elemental wielding is easy and push the rest of us around for what little time you have left."

Dr. Ezhno pumped out more energy through his Metal Saint exoskeleton suit and entered a slow descent as his suit's sword-arm and bladed crossbow-shield glowed gold. Below him in Laboratory 5A stood Daisy, Marut, and Warra together in a group. Athelstan was to the right, where the Kruna of Stone had punched chunks of the marble floor loose. Neva knelt a short distance behind Daisy's group. Chrissy was nowhere to be seen, but no one recalled hearing or noticing any doors open or any of the Elevation Disks get used. However, the head MAE commander did have the ability to fly through a hover function in her boots. The last anyone had seen of her, Chrissy had hid for cover under a table by one of Laboratory 5A's entrances.

Through one abrupt swipe of his exo suit's sword, Dr. Ezhno slashed a cutting wave of electricity at Athelstan. Immediately following the swing, Dr. Ezhno launched energy arrows off of his crossbow-shield at Neva. Athelstan evaded the relatively simple attack tracking his way with ease. With Neva's mobility hampered, the attack coming from the Metal Saint's crossbow forced Marut and Warra into calling up a combined column of water and wind to counteract the incoming arrows.

"I shall restore order where you can not!" declared Dr. Ezhno.

"You can't even give us anything even close to a challenge," said Daisy. "Not after we've got your Insta-Shield figured out. That's about all you had on us."

Dr. Ezhno started swaying through the air, rising to a height somewhere between Laboratory 6A and 7A. Utilizing the power of his Metal Saint, he zipped across the width of the room and back towards the center in multiple zigzagging aerial dashes. With similar quickness, he plunged and lashed his sword at Daisy. None of the many swipes Dr. Ezhno made contacted the agile Nova Form Kruna Yura of Earth, but he remained resolute. Daisy also rolled clear of the point-blank crossbow fire Dr. Ezhno snuck into his offensive.

Even if visibly frustrated, Dr. Ezhno zoomed back into the air with more focus and determination to defeat the elemental wielders opposing him.

"The fiends will fall," said Dr. Ezhno. "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the light."

Ramona gulped as she stared down the fantastical winged machine in front of her and Bowser. "Are you...talking to us?"

"Of course," the machine said. "I detect no other notable sentient lifeforms in the immediate vicinity."

"You're the Mother Computer," said Bowser. He pointed a finger at the machine. "Is that correct?"

"Yes, I am," the machine replied. "You both seem confused."

"We weren't expecting to walk into a room like this and see something like you," said Bowser. "We certainly weren't expecting a computer to talk back to us either."

"Peculiar..." said the Mother Computer. "Oh, I get it... You must be the new admin... My apologies. I assumed either Commander Sindograss or Dr. Ezhno had brought you here. They're the only ones allowed inside of this room. Regardless, it's about time you showed up."

"What do you mean by that?" Bowser asked.

"Exactly what I said," the Mother Computer replied. "Booting external drives...accessing ports...loading... Now signing in to Universal Database..."

Several of the specialized attachments, tanks, pods, and containment units connected to the Mother Computer turned on and lit up with gold and cyan lights. A hatch opened towards the bottom of the Mother Computer's body, though nothing sat inside the shallow black space.

"Can you tell us where any of the Black Mages are?" asked Ramona. "Or better yet, where Andrew is? Andrew Mitchell? Kruna Yura of Shadow-"

"Sign-in successful," the Mother Computer said. "Now scanning life forms..."

Ramona's eyes anxiously darted about the room. "Scanning for Andrew Mitchell, right?"

"Ramona, we just saw Andrew die earlier," Bowser said. After a brief pause, he raised an eyebrow. "We did...right? Or..."

"Database updated and fully accessible to admin," said the Mother Computer. "Please log in to your account now."

"Account?" Bowser said. He glanced at Ramona, only to see her staring back at him with a lost look on her face.

"Oh, yes, your accounts are not created yet," said the Mother Computer. "Confirming identities of new admin..."

"Admin of what?" Bowser asked.

The Mother Computer seemingly ignored the question. "Bowser Koopa...Ramona Maggie-Lynn...you're surely capable enough... Yes, you possess more than adequate power levels... You are far superior to the old admin. It's not even close... Very well. The security parameters are in place. Initiating firewall defense..."

The Mother Computer's cylindrical body split from its base to under its golden, elliptical "eye" down the middle and slid apart to reveal an empty glass chamber. In addition to cables, electrodes, and tubes, the chamber held an unidentifiable mixture of swirling red and viscous creamy white fluid. A shower of energy and minerals spritzed into the chamber in intervals. Bowser and Ramona could see all the secondary devices, containment units, and other extensions of the Mother Computer now active and at work.

"Now when you said 'security parameters,' what did you mean by that?" asked Ramona.

The Mother Computer's eye pulsed a bright glow. "In order to create new admin accounts, you must supply your credentials...by facing off against the strongest warriors on this planet. When you succeed, the old admin account will be reset for the new admin to take over."

"How's that for a security measure," Bowser grumbled. "What was Dr. Ezhno thinking in programming this?"

The Mother Computer's response came after a delay. "The Doctor did exactly what he needed to, as per my suggestion."

"Elaborate," Bowser said.

"This ensures no unauthorized personnel can gain access to my files and programs," said the Mother Computer. "Presumably, no one on this planet should be able to complete my challenge. This makes certain that control and access to my most important drives stays where it needs to be."

"Whatever happened to a simple password?" asked Bowser.

"I'm sure that can get hacked," said Ramona.

"Yes," said the Mother Computer. "I can not allow a meager hacker access. If you have not been approved by The Doctor, you yourself must prove your worth. Preparing 'Insane_Greenish_Bean' executable."

The mixture inside of the Mother Computer's glass chamber rose in volume and sloshed about as power zapped through it. Solidified, fleshy chunks formed in mere seconds, coagulating and conglomerating in a messy, morbid fusion that eventually gave shape to an organism. The organism continued to grow and strengthen at an impossibly rapid pace as the remaining, unused fluids within the chamber drained through the bottom. Only after light stopped shining in the chamber did the organism's progression stop. One final light ray that beamed down from the top of the glass chamber materialized a red, gold, and gray cloak over an all-black jumpsuit on the new being, along with a pair of opaque, swirly glasses. A dual jetpack helmet was the last thing that materialized before everything in the glass chamber shut off. The chamber's

hatch then opened, allowing the new being to exit its mechanical womb and enter into the world. Though short and diminutive, the green, bean-shaped being carried a hefty energy signature that gave Bowser and Ramona alarm.

"Win this battle to progress the test," the Mother Computer said. "Lose, and you may suffer a stiff penalty."

When Dr. Ezhno pointed his sword-arm down, a spider web of electricity zapped onto the Laboratory 5A floor, scattering and intertwining in an animated net from its sword tip origin. Dr. Ezhno traced his sword around him in a circle, spreading his sword shock in every direction and zapping all but one of the Kruna. Marut had flown out of the attack's scope, now entering a hard-arcing Drill Dash with the point of his saber sparking both natural air wielder and synthesized electricity. Though the Insta-Shield activated when Marut came by, the Kruna of Air's move still pushed Dr. Ezhno on contact and disrupted the electrical chain coming from the Metal Saint's sword.

The several crossbow shots Dr. Ezhno then let fly all missed Marut. His aim could not target the shifty and elusive flying air wielder, who seemed at this point more interested with distracting him while the four Kruna below could get a retaliation together. Once Dr. Ezhno noticed elemental activity ramping back up under him, he gave up on trying to shoot Marut.

"Enough of this tomfoolery," Dr. Ezhno grumbled. He generated an immense amount of power into his Metal Saint's sword, angling his suit up into a speedy ascent that looped into a rushing descent. Without any question, the Kruna knew that Dr. Ezhno aimed to shake the room with another tremor and disrupt their attack preparation. Unfortunately for them, they had no real counter for such a tactic, barring trying to time their jumps to the Metal Saint's impending strike.

The instant before the Metal Saint's sword slammed onto the floor, Athelstan dashed and dove under the Metal Saint to catch its sword with his hammer. Not only did he bash the power out of the sword,

but the impact itself and the impact angle knocked the Metal Saint into a wobbly, floaty spin. Athelstan then surprised everyone with a single massive hammer swing that broke through the protective barrier Dr. Ezhno's Insta-Shield projected, his attack the only solo effort that had gotten past the MAE doctor's automatic defense.

Then, like a dam breaking, the Kruna all decided to pile on while they had the brief opportunity to do so. Marut's two Volt Fusion Gust Boomerangs angled into Dr. Ezhno and struck at the same instant that an electric-laced cannon of water from Warra hit, launching the Metal Saint and its wearer into a violent, jerking ascent that then suffered under charged ice bullet gunfire the whole flight up. The only thing that saved Dr. Ezhno from a brutal Crystal Fist was the fact that he hovered out of reach in midair once his momentum slowed rather than plummet back to the Laboratory 5A floor.

Seeing as how she could not get to the Metal Saint at the current moment, Daisy scowled and took the time to harden her mighty crystallized mass into the denser, greater Final Crystal Fist. "So much for me getting mine in, but that's okay. I bet if Athelstan can break through like that, then a Nova Form Final Crystal Fist should too."

"It already looks like he can't handle much more," Warra said as Marut landed near him. "I'm inclined to think his suit won't endure if you bust through."

"Should we wait until he comes down?" asked Athelstan. "What if he tries something ranged-"

A sudden, pained cry from Neva hit the other Kruna's ears. They all turned around and saw Neva forced onto the floor on her stomach, her rifle knocked from her grasp. Now angrily standing atop the Kruna of Ice, Chrissy had Neva pinned and helpless under her own weight.

Bowser and Ramona had standing before them an exact replica of Fawful, an infamous, eccentric Beanish that had caused Bowser plenty enough trouble in the past. Right away, the Fawful double

showed that his helmet was not just for decoration when he activated its jets and flew towards the ceiling of Laboratory Zero-7. A slot in Fawful Clone's helmet opened, releasing energy orbs that cleared away the tables taking up space in the center of the room. Now, there would be plenty of space for whatever transpired next.

Bowser nudged Ramona behind him and away. "I'll handle this, Ramona."

As Ramona backed off, a claw-like robotic mouth emerged from the slot in Fawful Clone's helmet. The mouth aimed at Bowser and generated a popping, buzzing splatter of golden power that then crackled like a firework on its way towards the Kruna of Fire. In a defensive maneuver, Bowser retreated into his shell and spun in place. When the energy hit Bowser, his shell deflected it off to the left side of the deepest Heavenly Hall lab, where it exploded in a hair-raising bang.

Bowser came out of his shell in time to see Fawful Clone shoot eye beams of halos his way. Through a sweeping upward slash of his Blazer Claws, Bowser ripped a column of fire in front of him that counteracted the incoming pink halos. Both of the two Kruna heard a high pitched cackle as Fawful Clone pumped out green fireballs from his helmet's extension.

"Ouch! HOTNESS!" Fawful Clone cried. "IT IS THE OVERHEAT!"

A number of fireballs flew at Bowser, numbering in the dozens. With the flaming flurry coming, Bowser smirked and took out his Flare Sword. Through his elemental control, he diverted all of the fireballs away to either side of him. Each of the fireballs left behind charred scorch marks on the floors and walls.

"Okay, now here's *my* green fireball," said Bowser, curling a hand behind his back. His Fanning Torch ignited in his retracted, open palm, a fireball he then wound up and threw baseball-style. The Fanning Torch sank quick and sizzled along the ground most of the distance towards Fawful Clone. Normally, the Fanning Torch would spray flames more in front of itself when it exploded. That would not do anything to affect Fawful Clone, who floated up out of range with the use of his helmet jets.

But Bowser knew what he was doing. He swept his Flare Sword upward, channeling a command to not only make the Fanning Torch explode but direct more of its explosion vertically. The wide swath of green flames that followed caught Fawful Clone and sent him into a panicking frenzy. Fawful Clone dropped to the floor and rolled around in a frantic effort to extinguish the flames that had caught his legs and cloak.

"ACK!" Fawful Clone yelped. "It is the *superficial* overheat now!"

" *Only* superficial?" Bowser said, pointing the tip of his Flare Sword at the Beanish copy. An electromagnetic flaming bolt shot from the elemental tool and engulfed Fawful Clone. Cries of pain escaped Fawful Clone as he continued to roll on the floor, the clone now also experiencing twitchy spasms on top of his burns. But before he endured too much damage, Fawful Clone dispelled all of the fires at once. The black cloud of dark energy that erupted from Fawful Clone erased every last trace of Bowser's flames as it invigorated Fawful Clone's body and outlined his form.

Bowser raised an eyebrow. *This clone actually has Dark Star power* , he said in thought.

"Did the thought really crawl out from your mind that you had made such a speedy victory?" taunted Fawful Clone. "How foolish it is that you have developed such a brain! Or are you truly in possession of a stupidifying disease?!"

"Honestly, it's not even worth trash-talking you," said Bowser. "There's a reason you only exist as a clone and not the real person. The *original* wasn't even that tough."

"How fury-inducing your insolence is!" yelled Fawful Clone. "HAVE YOU THE BRAIN WORMS?!"

A pair of jagged shadow arms jutted out of the sides of Fawful Clone, encasing his biological arms in darkness. As Fawful Clone rose into the air again, one of his crooked dark hands birthed the beginnings of a great mass of shadow power mixed with cosmic energy. The swirling black, purple, and periwinkle wave that pumped out of Fawful Clone's hand missed Bowser entirely when the Kruna

of Fire spun forward underneath of it. Lighting his sword ablaze, Bowser ran at Fawful Clone and executed a fiery jumping rising slash. Out of a spin after contact, Bowser then smacked his sword onto Fawful Clone, launching the Beanish back to the floor.

Just for good measure, Bowser then let himself fall shell-first onto Fawful Clone. Both his weight and his shell's spikes did a number on the clone underneath him upon landing. When Bowser flipped back to his feet, Fawful Clone lay strewn out on the floor. His perpetual grin contorted, his glasses broken, and his cloak torn, Fawful Clone began to tremble and tremor in place.

"You're gonna have to try harder than that," said Bowser. "Let's get this over with already."

"No! I have not the mustaches to be defeated by!" whimpered Fawful Clone. "Now, I ram you!"

Fawful Clone snapped up and curled into a somersault flickering with dark embers. With the Beanish copy rolling his way, Bowser propped his sword up by his face. It took but a simple sidestep out of the path of Fawful Clone's tumble, paired with a flaming sword swing counter to whip Fawful Clone hooking to the left on a collision course with the far side Laboratory Zero-7 wall. A sharp grunt fluttered from Fawful Clone when his body ricocheted off of the wall and flopped to the floor.

"No! NO!" Fawful Clone shouted, his shaking increasing as he came to a rest on the tile. "It is the defeating!"

Moments later following an exponential increase in bodily convulsions, Fawful Clone fell apart. Literally. His cloak and helmet dropped into a pile of the many pieces of organs, limbs, fluids, and other biological matter that formerly made up his body and now only existed as his remains.

"You couldn't just hide and keep quiet," Daisy grumbled. "Things would've been a lot less painful for you if you kept being a coward."

Chrissy growled and stomped her foot hard onto the open wound on Neva's back. "It will be less painful for *you,* if you concede."

Daisy raised her Final Crystal Fist, her expression showing a bestial glare. "You sure about that?!"

"Chrissy, what are you doing?" Dr. Ezhno barked, descending to a hover near the Laboratory 5A floor. "Stay out of the way!"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" said Chrissy. "Since you were about to have these savages pummel you into nonexistence, I figured I had to do something to get them off of your back."

"Don't try to help!" Dr. Ezhno yelled. "You had your chance earlier, and you blew it! I should've never had to so much as even consider checking on you! These wielders should've been eradicated!"

"You're not doing much better!"

"I'm doing better than you!"

"Are you?"

"Don't argue with me! You know what you are!"

Chrissy gasped. "And what is that supposed to mean, Doctor?!"

"It means to stay out of my way and let me do my work!" demanded Dr. Ezhno.

"You're going to lose!" snapped Chrissy. "They have you figured out!"

"They *far* from have me figured out!" Dr. Ezhno said. "You're supposed to be smarter than this! Are you telling me I made a mistake?"

"Uh, not to be that guy, but we got you figured out, dude," said Marut.

"Shut it!" hissed Dr. Ezhno. "You don't know a thing! You don't know anything! This does not concern you!"

"Yes it does," said Athelstan.

"Can somebody get her off of me already?!" Neva screamed.

Warra spun his trident and thrust it ahead, charged water zapping out of his tool. The blast soared straight at Chrissy, who had enough time to move but froze in place. She did not want to give up her control over Neva, so she reacted in a way she would regret almost immediately once she realized what she did. In punching her extended right hand ahead of her, the incoming water split apart around and above her. She avoided contact with the charged water, which kept the water's electricity from transmitting into her. Though she still felt the buzz and vibrations of the electricity scatter past her, she had kept herself safe. Instead, she felt the heat of Daisy's, Warra's, Athelstan's, and Marut's stares hit her.

"Did she just screw with that water?" grunted Neva.

"She sure did," said Warra.

Chapter XLIII

Unearthed Rust:

"Impressive..." said the Mother Computer. "That may not have been enough of a challenge for the admin. You deserve something more...difficult."

Bowser put his Flare Sword away and made a mix between a grin and a frown. "If you're just gonna spit out clones at me, I can tell you right now that you're wasting your time. I'll trash whatever or whoever you copy. Why not just let us into that database already?"

"Bowser, I'm starting to wonder if maybe the database is kind of secondary to something else here," said Ramona, who stood back near the entrance to Heavenly Hall's Laboratory Zero-7.

"What do you mean?" Bowser asked. "Like we should be worried about something else?"

"I feel like I'm getting that impression," said Ramona. "I'm not sure, but...something about this all just seems...I don't know..."

The Mother Computer's numerous attachments and special external machinery activated and pumped energy and material into the glass chamber within the center of the computer's cylindrical form. "Next up, we shall test you with a hero who has proven himself as a formidable force in the modern world and has conquered countless foes in a variety of confrontations. Analysis of past battle data indicates that you have clashed with him on a number of occasions, so you should have a wealth of familiarity with him. Yes, a long-standing rivalry should make for a competitive clash. Now initiating 'Superstar_Jumpman' executable."

His eyebrows fiercely furrowing, Bowser ignited fires around his Blazer Claws and set himself up to attack before anything even took shape in the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat. As per Bowser's earlier request, Ramona stayed put and kept herself out of the way.

Nova Daisy scowled. "You too, Chrissy?"

"Oh, like it matters if you know now or not!" snapped Chrissy. "Are you really surprised at this point? It changes nothing! We're eradicating you for the better good of the world!"

"Why don't you start with yourselves," Athelstan muttered. The remark drew a sharp laugh out of Neva, which then prompted Chrissy to stomp down on the open wound on Neva's back. Marut blasted a wind gust at Chrissy in an attempt to knock her off of Neva, only to see Chrissy counter with a whip of water that splashed in an arcing wave when it blocked the rushing air. Seeing as how her secret was out, Chrissy did not have any reason to hide her water wielding abilities.

"Do you know how twisted this whole operation of yours is?" Warra swiftly spat out.

"Don't act like you're saints!" Dr. Ezhno called down from his Metal Saint above. "If it takes wielders to realize that wielders must die, then so be it!"

"Again, what's your motivation in all of this besides you dudes sucking?" asked Marut.

"That is not our motivation in the least!" barked Chrissy. "We have had a number of skilled wielders repent and align with MAE!"

"Because your values aligned with theirs, or because you fed them lies?" asked Warra. "You in particular seem to be a master manipulator. Don't think I forgot what you did to me. What do you think would be appropriate payback?"

"Don't look at me like that!" Chrissy yelled. "You keep your filthy hands to yourself!"

Daisy drowned out everyone else there in Laboratory 5A-7A as she thought back to earlier that night when her inner third eye had granted her a look at the energy signature within Andrew. She had also caught sight of Chrissy's as well, which, aside from a weaker

magnitude, seemed eerily similar to his. And yet, neither of theirs bore a resemblance to any standard elemental wielder; for instead of a freely flowing chain, their energies instead looked like disorganized, chaotic blobs. But in the same vein, Chrissy's seemed much too prominent to come from a non-wielder. Now, with the two manipulations Chrissy had just made, at least her notable energy made sense.

But that did not explain the irregularity within Chrissy. While Neva, Athelstan, Marut, and Warra verbally went back and forth with Chrissy and Dr. Ezhno, Daisy focused on her third eye. She stared through Chrissy, the animated image of the MAE commander's energy signature appearing just as it did earlier in Twilight City. Chrissy's power had no flow and existed within her as an amorphous mess. Though still stuck under Chrissy's feet, Neva's energy signature looked as it should. The Kruna Yura of Ice's power flowed in a complex but defined circuit throughout her body. The only disruptions Daisy saw in Neva were in her injured right foot and her injured back; but even those distortions maintained some sense of direction along a current. Chrissy's signature had no such organization.

Daisy then got an idea. After double checking her other three teammates and her own self, she then turned around and gazed up at Dr. Ezhno. Interestingly, though not nearly as vibrant or robust as anyone else's there in the lab, Dr. Ezhno's energy signature kept a constant, concise flow like the Kruna. His power had flow and order, where Chrissy's had anything but.

Dr. Ezhno's energy is normal , Daisy thought, turning back around to face Chrissy. *So then why is Chrissy the only outlier? And Andrew too?*

"So it's quite obvious by now!" Chrissy growled at the Kruna as a whole. "Not only are you primitive and statistically more inclined to violence and destructive behaviors, but your breaths smell like feet!"

"Chrissy!" Daisy said, firm and decisive in her tone. "What experiments did Dr. Ezhno run on you?"

Chrissy gasped, her expression turning startled. "What? None! He

didn't do anything to me!"

Daisy's eyes briefly went to her right. "Athelstan, do you still have that paper we got from Pi'illo Castle?"

Athelstan dug around in his Hammerspace Belt, pulling out the paper in question moments later. "This diagram, right? Hey, you know what – there's even a mention of Dr. Ezhno on this thing! I just remembered that!"

"How'd you get that paper?!" hissed Chrissy. "You had that the whole time?!"

"You dropped it when you ran to the castle roof," said Marut.

"There's a lotta fancy biological terminology on that paper," said Daisy. "Just what is all that about? Have you been doing experiments on elemental wielders?"

"It's none of your business!" Chrissy yelled.

"It is," said Daisy. "You see, as Kruna, we have a role in helping moderate things on this planet. And if there have been some unethical practices going on, that's something we have to act on."

"Along with everything else crummy that you've done, of course," said Athelstan.

Fed up with her current situation, Neva jerked herself free from under Chrissy's weight. As Neva rolled, Chrissy stumbled and tried to regain her balance. Neva rocked onto a hand and a knee, ready to react if Chrissy attempted retaliating. However, the MAE commander did not try to attack her.

"Chrissy, that's it; you're done here," Dr. Ezhno declared, descending to the floor. "I can't have you here anymore. You're becoming a liability. Leave and allow me space to work without you interfering."

"If you think we're letting her go anywhere, think again," said Warra. "We'd rather just capture you both right here, right now."

"I agree," Neva grunted, motioning Marut to her. Once together, Neva took out her Chill Sickle, and Marut readied his Energized Air Saber. They joined their Volt Fusion-buffed elementals into a massive electromagnetic cloud of air, ice, and lightning, which Neva's own natural magnetic power further augmented. The dimly lit room flickered and flashed with increasing gold, light blue, and white hues. The sight of the colossal collection of power raised substantial alarm within Dr. Ezhno, who broke out into a nervous sweat. No doubt in his mind, he knew his exoskeleton in its current condition could not survive such a strike.

"That looks like enough to morph that Metal Saint into junk metal," said Athelstan.

Daisy pointed at Dr. Ezhno. "Make one wrong move, and it's over for you." Her head then turned to Chrissy. "And that goes double for you, water wielder."

Chrissy flinched at the mere mention of herself as a wielder. "I am not one of you!"

"You're right," said Daisy. "You're inhumane. Nothing like us." She looked back at Dr. Ezhno. "What'll it be, Doctor? You wanna try continuing this fight, or just end it now, while you still have the option to do so? Either way, you've lost."

Dr. Ezhno scowled. With each passing second, Marut and Neva shuttled more power into their combined elemental mass. Warra and Athelstan kept a close eye on Chrissy, ensuring she could not slip away.

What stepped out of the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat perfectly resembled the former long-time rival of Bowser. The clone of Mario even copied the typical set of overalls and the hammer the original carried. Attached to his belt and hanging off of his left hip, Mario Clone possessed an exact replica of Mario's golden-yellow Cape.

"Can this computer copy anyone?" asked Ramona.

"I'm assuming anyone who's in the Universal Database," said Bowser.

"So then who's *not* in that database?" asked Ramona.

Mario Clone spoke no words as he ignited a burning orange flame in his right palm and drew it behind his back. His opposite hand went up to the front of his face, his stance crouching in a defensive gesture. Despite a bit of nervousness welling up in him, Bowser smirked at the clone's setup.

I already know what he's going to do, Bowser thought. *He'll wait for me to attack up close, sidestep, slam that Firepalm into me, quick-draw his Cape to spin me around, then do a jumping kick. I've seen Mario do that more than enough. I'm not falling for that...*

Bowser raised his fiery Blazer Claws and transferred the flames to his palms. He then retracted the talons of his Blazer Claws and entered the stance for a Tavado blast. There was every chance Mario Clone could reflect each flaming torpedo through a swift swipe of that Cape, but Bowser had awareness of that possibility as well.

I wonder how well that computer copied his Cape, Bowser thought. *I have to see. If the computer copied it right, one swing of that Cape will deflect every piece of the Tavado.*

Bowser soon got his answer once he blasted the angling rockets of fire at Mario Clone. Using his free hand, Mario Clone unhitched his Cape and flung it across him in one smooth motion. The maneuver birthed a hot wind and mystical sparkles that diverted the incoming fires in every direction other than at him. Bowser slipped out from the path of one deflected Tavado torpedo, as did Ramona further back behind him.

"Not bad," Bowser said as several small explosions of flame blitzed the sides and ceiling of the room. "But I'm growing more concerned about this computer as time goes on."

From what Bowser could tell, Mario Clone still had a Firepalm positioned behind his back. Now, Mario Clone fluttered the Cape in front of him, as if beckoning Bowser into attacking. The gesture

seemed demeaning.

"Wanna be a matador, huh?" Bowser said. He hurled a fireball from his mouth, which made for an even easier deflection off of Mario Clone's Cape than the Tavado did. The reflected fireball flew straight back at Bowser, but he stood his ground. Reactivating his Blazer Claws, Bowser executed a double-slash at the incoming fireball and sent it back at Mario Clone with extra speed. Before a volley began, Mario Clone channeled his elemental fire control through his Cape and directed Bowser's fireball to crash onto the room floor.

Bowser raised an eyebrow. *I'm not sure how well they made this clone, but...I wonder if he knows what* I'll *do...*

Mario Clone then abruptly dashed at Bowser, Firepalm hanging down low as he ran. The Firepalm came burning up from below once within striking distance, a trail of flames left singeing the air where Bowser formerly stood. Spinning just after Bowser did, Mario Clone whirled his Firepalm into a second strike out of a twist. The lean Bowser made to spare himself the contact put him in prime position to give Mario Clone a shell bash, which Mario Clone found unable to guard against. Mario Clone whipped out of the two bounces his body made off of the floor and slung two fireballs Bowser's way. The gravity-bound fireballs accelerated with each hop, but ultimately amounted to nothing more than a fiery clash once Bowser flared defensive flames out from his Blazer Claws.

The moment Mario Clone landed, Bowser blazed at him in a Whirling Fortress tackle. However, Mario Clone then demonstrated the Mother Computer's accuracy through a fast, powerful back flip jump that brought him to the room's ceiling. Mario Clone had to put his hands to the ceiling to absorb and negate the remainder of his great accent speed through his arms, just so that his high jump would not bang his head in. Executing just the slightest bit of influence on the angle at which he fell, Mario Clone aimed his descent at Bowser and simultaneously sizzled flames around his spread hands and feet while he entered a spin. When Bowser looked up out of his technique, he saw the Mario Inferno Tornado dropping directly at him.

On reflex, Bowser jumped back and away. Mario Clone dropped to

the point in space Bowser had just left, his technique climaxing into a fiery vortex upon landing but notching no hit. The Fanning Torch fireball Bowser slung in midair sprayed Mario Clone in green flames the instant after the Mario Inferno Tornado's fires faded. Just after the last of the Fanning Torch flames stopped, Mario Clone met the jumping, flaming Blazer Claw slash Bowser dealt. Somehow despite having just endured a nasty hit, Mario Clone got his Cape up and in the way to counter the second slash Bowser attempted with his other claw. The Cape's special properties flipped Bowser in the other direction on contact, effectively negating any opportunity to chain together another attack.

When Bowser realized the Cape had spun him, he turned back around. He saw Mario Clone's form experiencing difficulty holding together, as was the case with Fawful Clone's body. Now more or less split to either side in front of the Mother Computer, the two combatants stayed put and made no further advances towards one another.

"Not the best idea for a test, really," said Bowser. "I know what he'll do, when he'll do it, and why he'll do it. There's stuff this clone hasn't done yet that I know the original can do. If this was supposed to be a challenge, it's not turning out that way."

Mario Clone pointed at Bowser. "I know what you'll do too. It's a two-way street."

Bowser grinned. "Do you really?"

In a before unseen transition, Bowser staggered his stance to an extreme width. His torso moving diagonal to Mario Clone, Bowser raised his arms out and behind him. Intense fireballs roared and encircled his wrists. Mario Clone showed some concern over the stance, but then nearly mirrored it just seconds later.

"Okey-dokey," said Mario Clone. "Here I come."

Mario Clone's arms went far behind him, huge bursts of fire engulfing his hands. The fires took on the shape of two dragon heads, turning a searing white-red meld. With one dragon head per hand, Mario Clone had his Twin Dragon Flame on standby and

strengthening.

"I had been saving this one for a moment kind of like this," said Bowser. "I never had to use it though. But now seems about as good a time as any."

The fires Bowser sustained and grew now turned a shining yellow-gold-orange meld. Their shapes adopted the form of an avian raptor head around each fist. Bowser's efforts produced a technique he now held and amplified as an answer to the Twin Dragon Flame: Dual Phoenix Flame.

From her safe zone by the Laboratory Zero-7 entrance, Ramona saw nearly identical stances in front of her that harbored similar techniques. Neither of the two attacks acted the same when released, however. Bowser only launched his blast the moment he saw Mario Clone shoot his. The Twin Dragon Flame flew straight, both fiery heads in a close clockwise spin around the other. The Dual Phoenix Flame twisted in the reverse direction and with a wide, loose center of rotation. Both blasts operated as lone, non-continuous bursts.

As the two attacks came together, the Twin Dragon Flame spread out and enlarged its spin. In direct contrast, the Dual Phoenix Flame contracted and narrowed. The Dual Phoenix Flame even gained speed as it constricted. Once the two great fire bursts met, the Dual Phoenix Flame blasted clear through the relatively unstable gap making up the Twin Dragon Flame's center. Both heads of the Twin Dragon Flame lost their connection and direction, splitting apart and diverting off course while the Dual Phoenix Flame continued pulling inward and locked onto its line of flight. Bowser's technique concentrated its power like a funnel as it boosted in speed and slammed into Mario Clone. Its great force lifted Mario Clone off of his feet and carried him all the way into the wall behind him, where it splattered its fires all over him and outward. Covered in burn marks, Mario Clone flopped out of his impact site on the wall and crashed onto the room floor. His body held together for only a handful of extra seconds before dismantling into an organic mess.

"Enough," Dr. Ezhno finally said. "Enough, please... I can't take this madness anymore."

A heavy sigh escaping him, Dr. Ezhno knelt his Metal Saint exo suit and lowered its weaponized arms. Marut and Neva did not add to their combined elemental charge, but they maintained what they had already gathered. Chrissy seemed puzzled with Dr. Ezhno's gesture and darkening tone.

"I can't stand this torment," said Dr. Ezhno. "It's suffocating. It's unbearable. It has broken me beyond repair. Never in my life did I ever want to commit a genocide."

"Then why are we here now?" said Daisy.

"You...your kind..." said Dr. Ezhno, grimacing. "You who shunned me, who tortured me, who took every opportunity to put me down and label me as a lesser being...for being inferior, for not having the skill and power that you do... How cruel you can be, just because I'm not the same level of wielder. I heard it every time I tried to lift a boulder, every time I tried shifting sand, every time I dropped a stone mass. I did not even have the typical strength a stone wielder would naturally possess... I remember each of their vile words, ill wishes, and violent acts. I remember all of them telling me to 'give up,' that I'm 'not good enough,' that I'm 'wasting my time...' It would be one thing if I was born without an elemental affinity... They all could take advantage of their natural gifts...so why couldn't I?"

Chrissy began trembling once Dr. Ezhno climbed out of his Metal Saint. Her uneasiness gained anger and frustration as she glanced at each of the five Kruna Yura before her. She could feel the weight of ultimate, final defeat washing over her, but she would not accept it. For as maddened as she became, Dr. Ezhno turned more dejected.

"I remember challenging another stone wielder," said Dr. Ezhno. "It was a much hyped and anticipated fight that earned notice all throughout my middle school. But as expected, I lost. And I lost embarrassingly. Even worse, no one ever let me live down the pride-crushing, self-esteem-slaying thrashing I received. *Specifically* , other elemental wielders. From then on, they made me a much more

recurring target. A habitual victim of hate, harassment, bullying, and other assorted cruelties... I only had my best friend and childhood love to fall back on and get through those troublesome times. But there came a time when I did not even have her. On a special date we had one night, an air wielder and a shadow wielder assaulted us. And because of those two, she died..."

Dr. Ezhno's expression twisted into a deranged frown. "You will never understand the level of hate I have for you. Your people made my life hell and took away the most important person in my life! All that you wielders have made me suffer through, all that you stripped from me, all that has been done and can not be undone; for it all, I weaponized what I knew no one could match. My intellect."

Only now did Marut and Neva decide to disband their elemental mass. At this point, none of the Kruna expected any further resistance from either Dr. Ezhno or Chrissy.

"But...there is nothing for me to live for," Dr. Ezhno said, more downcast than ever. "My life has already been ruined, and it is far beyond reversible with the revolution I have instigated. If it were up to me, I would've been dead by now. I never wanted any of this. I never wanted to cast myself out of society. I never wanted to work on a project like this. I never wanted to devote all of my efforts towards such hateful vengeance. I never wanted to use my brain for death. It all just arose out of a feeling of need... I just want a normal life. I just want to be myself. I just want to be accepted. I just want my Aria back... I'll never have any of that. No matter what I did, I never would have had any of that. Fate locked me into one path. Now, I just want it all to end. I'm sick of all of this. I am sick of what I have done. I am sick of what I have become. Please...you have the power to resolve this whole conflict. Wipe me from existence. I can handle this no longer..."

Neva frowned. "You actually want us to kill you?"

Chrissy stepped towards Dr. Ezhno, passing by the other Kruna. "Gabriel, no, don't. Not this-"

Warra held out his trident in front of Chrissy before she could pass him. "Advance no further."

"I just want to talk to him," Chrissy said, trying to push the trident down.

"Talk there," said Warra. "What do you have to say that you can't say from where you are right now?"

Chrissy put her hands up. "Nothing. We'll concede. We will stop all of this. Just don't kill him."

"No, there's no point," Dr. Ezhno said, kneeling down. "I am finished. I will not persist with this. No more."

"Gabriel, you can't," said Chrissy. "Not like this..."

"Be quiet, Chrissy," said Dr. Ezhno. "I have accepted my fate."

"I haven't! You can't just die! I won't allow it!"

"It doesn't matter what you say or allow, Chrissy."

"Yes, it does!"

Dr. Ezhno then lashed out with an angry exclamation. "No, it doesn't! And you know it doesn't! I do not answer to anyone but one person! And *you* are not her!"

Chrissy's expression filled with twitchy anguish. "I know I'm not! I am who I am! Whether you like it or not, that is my reality. I will never be someone else, even if you made me to be!"

"Exactly. So enough nonsense out of you!"

"It's not nonsense! I can't stand to see you suffer like this and want death! Don't you know what you mean to me? Why don't I mean the same to you anymore? Why can't I? Why can't you just accept me for who I am?"

"YOU KNOW WHY!" screamed Dr. Ezhno. "You're not Aria! You were not *then,* and you won't ever be her! You're just another failed clone! That's it! You're imperfect! You're nothing!"

Chrissy clutched her stomach, collapsing to the floor moments later.

Silent tears followed after, but her distress had no effect on Dr. Ezhno. The five Kruna Yura did not know how to react to the stunning statement Dr. Ezhno had shouted. Everything about the situation left them speechless. It was as if a bomb of new information had detonated in everyone's faces.

But then a few seconds later, actual bombs detonated in everyone's faces. Dr. Ezhno caught everyone off guard when he threw Stun Charges from out of the inside of his coat. The dozen or so tiny mechanical balls looked to be of little threat for the few instants the Kruna noticed them flying their way; but once the balls bounced a single time, they uncorked electrical mechanisms that zapped stunning shocks out in a wide, spinning radius. One after another, each of the Kruna endured a paralyzing electrocution and fell to the floor with little control over their bodies. Careless as Dr. Ezhno's throw was, he almost caught Chrissy with the Stun Charges.

A satisfied, smug grin on his face, Dr. Ezhno gazed upon the now helpless Kruna before him. "A shame, how easily you let things that don't concern you distract you."

"You..." Daisy barely grunted out. "Why..."

"This is long overdue retribution," Dr. Ezhno hissed. "Not just for me, but for *all* you wielders have stepped on and abused. Your debt is far too expansive to pay off with anything other than your extinction. That is the only reason I live on now: FOR YOUR JUDGMENT."

"Ch-...cheap bastard..." groaned Neva.

"Thank you for your pity," Dr. Ezhno said with a darkening smile. "Unfortunately for you, I have been beaten down, broken, and smacked around by elemental wielders too many times for any outcome other than your defeat to be acceptable! By the time this paralysis wears off, I'll be long gone; but I'm coming back...back with something made *especially* for you."

"How?" Athelstan mumbled.

"Through the use of my *greatest invention* to date," Dr. Ezhno said, making a dash for the doors out of the lab. "Such an evermore all-

knowing machine can't fail me! Oh, Chrissy – be a dear and see about killing one or two of them off for me, while they can't move!"

Dr. Ezhno disappeared out of the far side Laboratory 5A doors and down the halls. Chrissy's saddened anguish slowed, but it never stopped. She did not bother to even get up. Several minutes later when the Kruna regained neuromuscular function and could move once more, she sat there as a melancholic sniveling statue. She paid little mind to the five elemental wielders that eventually gathered around her.

Chapter XLIV

The Disgraced Hero Returns:

Ramona sighed, kneeling by the room entrance on one knee with her hands cupped on her lead thigh. She watched Bowser face the Mother Computer after he had popped an Ultra Mushroom in his mouth. He seemed as cool, calm, and collected as ever, easing into a defensive stance as if anticipating the Mother Computer generating another challenger. Two piles of clone remains sat on the Laboratory Zero-7 floor; one pile formerly belonging to a clone of Fawful, and the other from a copy of Mario.

"These clones really don't have the best durability," Ramona remarked.

"It shows," said Bowser. "They endure enough damage, they crumble to pieces."

"Perhaps I miscalculated your abilities," the Mother Computer finally said. "Oh, no, that's not it. My programs and applications are near-perfect. Even as I scan you now, you are great, but not unstoppable. Such is the beauty of independent thought and free will. No simulation can account for that. Your cunning wits and elemental wielding IQ have given you an edge that even I can not provide an algorithm for. So now, let us bring back a warrior with both excellent power *and* superb acuity. In her time long ago, she was the most powerful elemental wielder on the planet. Before long, she became the most powerful wielder-spellcaster hybrid as well. Perhaps even more dangerous than her powers and wits was her instability. Oh, the pitfalls of organic life. With the possibility of such shortcomings, you organisms could never create a perfect being alone no matter how hard you ran evolution through your DNA. But, I digress. Let us proceed with your next test. Opening 'Kruna_Genesis_Fire' executable."

"I figured as much," said Bowser. "This better be the last one you try to pull on us."

The Mother Computer chuckled. "We'll see..."

Chrissy's sobbing quieted, though she continued to look more distraught as time passed. She had yet to get off of the Laboratory 5A floor, and she did not look at any of the Five Kruna Yura in front of her. None of the Kruna knew what Chrissy would try to do now, if anything. Chrissy herself likely did not even know. But given the previous request Dr. Ezhno made that Chrissy refused to even acknowledge, the Kruna wondered if Chrissy maybe not only had a possible change of heart, but a broken heart as well.

"You ready to cooperate now?" Nova Daisy asked.

Chrissy gazed up at Daisy, her watery eyes containing more emotion than any of the Kruna had ever seen out of her. Her mind scrambled, Chrissy could not come up with a verbal response.

"Don't have me repeating myself," Daisy said.

"Cooperate..." Chrissy mumbled. "For what...what do you want with me... He's right. I'm nothing, in the end."

"Well, 'nothing's' been kicking our asses for the past couple of weeks," said Athelstan, still managing a jolly laugh.

Despite the Kruna of Stone's lighthearted comment, Daisy's attention went elsewhere. Strangely, she picked up on an incredibly high energy signature nearby. A thought crossed her mind on if the energy's sudden presence had something to do with the machine Dr. Ezhno had said he would use. If true, then the special machine had to be very close by for him to have already gotten to it.

Coming back to the world around her, Chrissy glanced all throughout Laboratory 5A and the knocked-over machines and equipment. Some miscellaneous items from Laboratory 6A and 7A above also now lay on their side, a fair amount close to the edge and liable to drop off if disturbed again. Only now did she finally force herself up, but she refused to accept the hand Daisy held out to her.

"Look at this mess," Chrissy murmured. "I can't believe this..."

Marut shrugged. "Stuff gets messed up when there's fights, dude."

Chrissy shook her head. "No, not the lab. Just...everything... All this work, and effort... But him...he's...he's really losing it. All he wants is to see his vengeance succeed and come to fruition. He really doesn't care who gets hurt now...and he doesn't care about me. He'll replace me as soon as he can make a better clone. It already became clear that he would, before even today..."

"So what does that mean for you?" asked Warra.

Chrissy sighed. "I don't know anymore."

"How's this then," said Daisy. "You take us to that 'invention' he was talking about before he gets a chance to do anything with it, and then you can figure that part out once we capture him."

"I don't have to listen to you," Chrissy snarled.

Neva pointed her rifle's laser sight square on the bridge of Chrissy's nose. "Now you do."

Warra's eyes split wide-open in an instant. He likely picked up on what Daisy had noticed, and he could feel it buzzing around directly underneath them. Gritting his teeth, Warra's gaze bounced back and forth between both sets of doors that led into and out of Laboratory 5A.

"Ergh...fine," Chrissy grumbled, at which point Neva smirked and lowered her elemental gun. "But if you think my opinion of you savages has changed at all, think again."

Marut rolled his eyes. "Yeah, because everything we try to tell you goes straight through your brain case."

Chrissy scowled. "We will settle this once and for all afterwards."

"Yeah, yeah – get moving already!" barked Neva.

"No," murmured Warra, seemingly to no one in particular. "He can't

be here. Why now?"

"Who is that?" asked Daisy. "Are you sensing it too?"

Warra nodded and gulped. A genuine sense of fear showed in his expression. Seeing his alarm, Daisy tensed up and readied herself to react to any sudden change in their immediate surroundings.

"I've been sensing something," said Marut. "But now, it's feeling like it's really close."

"Sense what?" Chrissy asked. "What are you talking about? Sensing? Energies? How are you doing that without a device?"

"Maybe if you were a better wielder, you would've learned how to do it yourself," said Neva.

"Warra, what's wrong, man?" Marut asked. "You looking all shook and stuff. You don't usually be looking like that."

"If you know something, you better tell us now, Warra," said Daisy.

"I know we're all in trouble," Warra replied. "I have a feeling he knows we're here."

"Who?" asked Daisy.

Warra tightened his grip on his trident, not giving a direct response. "We may as well just wait here. No sense in having him chase us through the building, because he *will* do it if we start running..."

The newest generation that stepped out of the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat gave a deranged, malicious stare out of her large and angular amber eyes. The bulbous third eye on her forehead under her crooked, pointy, white-bowed black hat soon opened as well along the lengthy slit running through her forehead marking. The white and black maid-like dress that covered her curvy form looked exactly like Bowser and Ramona remembered it as. Once she pulled off the Mystic Broom from her back, the pale, seemingly ageless woman ran a hand through her long, thick, messy black hair and

giggled. Coming from her, the cute gesture was anything but endearing.

Bowser took a deep breath, a wave of nervousness welling up inside of him. "No kidding, it actually made her. I didn't think we'd see her again..."

Ramona shuddered. "Technically, it's not her, just a copy of her...but... Man, I forgot...how scary she was..."

"Just a clone," Bowser said with a disgusted groan. "This computer's gotta be stalling us, but no more. Once I beat *her,* the computer will have no excuse to let us into that database and stop trying to 'test' us."

Marissa Clone lifted her broom overhead, sparkling magical energy intermixing with fire. The two powers popped and sizzled from the broom like an inverted fountain. With a swift spin of her body, the copy of the demon witch sprayed her combined power across the entirety of the room in scattered waves. The otherwise random nature of her attack's trajectory shifted when her Malocchio Eye glowed and narrowed the aim of the magical flames squarely on the two Kruna Yura present. Bowser countered with his own fire influence, diverting all of Marissa Clone's flames that bounced his way away from him. Despite technically not in the fight, Ramona found herself exhausting some light power to block the mystic fires lunging at her.

A shining golden star of great width and breadth formed in Marissa Clone's free palm as she hovered from side to side, the magical five-pointed shape taking on a wickedly fast rotation as it gained power. When she slung it out of her hold, the revolving star flipped several times on its way towards Bowser. With an attack heading at him whose track seemed unpredictable, Bowser reacted with a flaming spin into his shell. Both the rotating inferno he generated paired with the spin of his exceptionally hard shell provided the defense needed to endure Marissa Clone's saw-sounding star and bash it way off to the side of the room, where it sliced clean into the wall and burrowed several feet in before slowing and dissipating.

When Bowser came out from his shell defense, he could not see

Marissa Clone and failed to notice her quick enough on his own; but he heard Ramona yell, "Behind you!"

Bowser dove ahead just fractions of a second away from enduring a beastly, titanic slam of Marissa Clone's Mystic Broom to his back. Instead, her broom smashed onto the floor. A fan of magic energy erupted on contact, spraying upward from the point of impact like a spastic sprinkler.

The moment Bowser turned, Marissa Clone hit her flight and rocketed straight at him. She again struck her Mystic Broom down in a similar manner, but she once more caught nothing but floor. Bowser had reacted better and quicker in his evasion, even countering out of his backwards stumble with a successful point-blank throwing of several fireballs. After sustaining multiple fiery strikes, Marissa Clone backed off in a hurry and returned to the air above in the room.

I should've seen her that first time , Bowser thought. *With how fast she moves, I'll have to put full focus into my Alkemei Kracielle to make sure I don't lose sight of her anywhere in this room...*

Marissa Clone bared her teeth and licked her fangs, her fingers and broom glistening with sparkles. Even though she was not the original, the clone still evoked the same sense of dread and fright. Bowser and Ramona both could almost sense Marissa Arkana's malicious bloodlust in the clone. Not a single person any of the Kruna Yura had faced to date, aside from Osiris in the future, and maybe Kokoro, ever instilled as much anxiety and fear as Marissa did; and yet, the Mother Computer captured such qualities into a mere clone. If they had not been there to see the clone's generation, Bowser and Ramona would have thought that Marissa had somehow escaped from the Elemental Seal they and the other Kruna Yura had trapped her in.

Several tense moments of waiting led into a surprise none of the five Kruna could have guessed. The Kruna and Chrissy heard an explosion from above, one that rocked the entirety of the building. Some of the lighting in Laboratory 5A-7A cut off. A crashing sound

quickly followed, as if something had collapsed inward. Objects from the two levels above teetered and fell, becoming a part of the mess down in Laboratory 5A. Another crashing sound boomed even closer than the previous noises did. In the silence that came after, they heard a faint echo over them that increased in volume and sounded of metal-like footsteps.

"What is going on up there?" Chrissy cried.

She soon got an answer when a brilliant beaming, glistening tsunami ripped off half of the Laboratory 5A-7A ceiling, revealing a clear view of the night sky above. Apparently, the being they saw hover down from the opening above had favored blowing his way through the very top of MAE Command Center over rising up through the bottom levels. The extent of how much damage he had done to Floor Eight and Floor Seven in order to make his way to the lab remained to be seen; but judging by how much carnage his watery cannon had cleaved free in front of their eyes, the Kruna and Chrissy had a hunch that the being closing in on them had not a care in the world for how much destruction he caused.

The moonlight above heralded in a warrior that seemed to be misplaced in time, for his aesthetic looked out of touch with the current era. Covered from head to toe in navy blue armor highlighted with orange and black, he possessed a hoverpack, a pair of tonfa with a design and build advanced centuries ahead of what the present time could produce, and a tarnished golden, mouthless mask that had experienced great wear and damage. Both tonfa extended energy-charged blades before he even touched the Laboratory 5A floor. The black, angled slit where his eyes peered out from glowed with two red orbs.

Warra took a deep breath and readied his stance for battle. The other Kruna followed his lead, while Chrissy backed away and ducked behind an overturned, inactive Valkyrian Guardian. From what they could tell, the newcomer had no good nor peaceful intentions.

"I was hoping I would be wrong," mumbled Warra.

This energy ... Daisy thought, staring down the descending dark

knight. *I don't think I've ever felt something like it before... It feels twisted and tormented. Tainted...*

"Uh, you mind letting us in on something, Warra?" said Neva.

"Hadal Wraith Blackguard," Warra said as the armored figure landed. "He's from the future."

"What? That can't be right," said Daisy.

"The distant future," said Warra. "Now's not a good time to explain."

Even as far deep into MAE Command Center and Heavenly Hall's Laboratory Zero as they were, Ramona could sense an incredible disturbance. As she watched Bowser and Marissa Clone exchange fiery, flaming blows on one another, Ramona picked up on the distorted energy signature of the newcomer now engaging her other teammates. She then noticed the Mother Computer's eye momentarily flickering.

"... Unidentifiable sentient being present again," said the Mother Computer, its tone notably lower than normal.

Ramona frowned, thinking, *What does it mean by that?*

The moonlight that shone on Hadal Wraith Blackguard presented a divine gloss as it glistened and sparkled off of his armor, yet the effect seemed anything but holy. His presence carried a mysterious air of contradiction. At first glance, the dark knight looked like a heavenly deity, a warrior of divine origin; but at the same time, he looked sickly, tainted, broken, just...wrong. Not right. As she stared at him, Daisy felt like she saw someone who had fallen, someone who had experienced a great, lamentable decline from former glory; for on one hand, Hadal Wraith Blackguard appeared like a noble being. But on the other hand, an impure and corrupt aura overshadowed what should have been a heroic stature.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard raised his right Energized Tonfa and

pointed its glowing power blade solely at Warra. The other four Kruna Yura saw the gesture and glanced at their water teammate, who appeared shaky and timid. Despite being fully aware of the situation, Warra seemed unfocused. Other than a flinch, he barely reacted to Hadal Wraith Blackguard aiming his way.

A torrent of clouded water reached out of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's raised blade, promptly countered with a pinpoint electrified freezing blast Neva shot off that stopped it dead in its tracks before it reached its target. Undeterred, Hadal Wraith Blackguard lifted the tonfa in his opposite arm and pumped out a cannon of water from its blade. In similar fashion, a high-voltage sweep of wind from Marut clashed with the incoming water. Still paying the others little mind, Hadal Wraith Blackguard then released pressurized water from both of his tonfa blades at once. The dark knight's offensive again failed to reach Warra and instead met a wall of energized stone that Athelstan ripped loose from the laboratory flooring.

His glowing red eyes further angling in irritation, Hadal Wraith Blackguard crossed his tonfa in front of him and took several individual steps towards the Kruna. The hesitation-like steps then snapped into a full-blown sprint at Warra, only for a certain Nova Form earth wielder to leap in front of the Kruna Yura of Water and challenge Hadal Wraith Blackguard head-on. Through a swift and forceful thrust of an upside-down palm, Daisy shook free disruptive seismic power that slowed down Hadal Wraith Blackguard and opened an opportunity to easily counter. The charged swipe she laid down with her Laser Drill Staff knocked Hadal Wraith Blackguard away from them, at least for the moment.

"Chrissy, is this guy your doing?" Daisy asked.

"No, I swear I had nothing to do with this!" Chrissy responded, startled. "I've never seen him before – not in real life or in the Universal Database!"

"Whoever he is, he doesn't seem to care about the rest of us," said Athelstan. "He's centering his aggression on Warra."

"Yeah – why?" Daisy asked, staring down Hadal Wraith Blackguard.

"Yeah, what's the deal, dude?" asked Marut. "What's your beef with Warra?"

"He will fall into corruption and decay," Hadal Wraith Blackguard said, his voice distorted with a slight cybernetic undertone. He pointed at Warra. "His life, his future...an eternal purgatory... Feared and loathed by all, he will become nothing more than a soulless drifter fending only for himself and slaying whoever gets in his way."

"Hah! Doubt it," said Daisy. "You gotta come up with a better excuse than that."

"You not wanting to accept truth will gift you a terrible fate," Hadal Wraith Blackguard said. "Stand aside and allow me the right to complete my mission."

Marut frowned and stepped to the front of the Kruna. "Look here, freaky knight dude – you're comin' at us with some fancy Halloween costume-lookin' armor and some robo-suit mask hiding your face, and you're tryna attack our bro. You looking pretty suspect right about now."

Neva pointed her sniper's laser sight on Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "I'm not giving anything this guy says any credit."

"Especially with the way he showed up," said Athelstan. "Wouldn't the door have been easier?"

Warra said nothing. He straightened his posture and looked more composed, but his expression remained troubled. With a heavy sigh, he called forth a column of water to surround his Energized Ocean Trident as he put up his guard.

"You might have these companions of yours fooled, but I already know," Hadal Wraith Blackguard said. "... There's supposed to be a shadow wielder with you, isn't there? It's a very good thing he isn't here with you, Warra. A very good thing. That keeps him safe..."

"What? From you?" snapped Daisy.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard pointed at Warra. "No...from him."

"Everything you say is trash!" Neva yelled.

"You don't see him protesting, do you?" said Hadal Wraith Blackguard. He turned his attention to Warra and focused solely on him. "You know good and well what I'm talking about. It's not surprising to see that you didn't let them know what I let you know. Like I said...you can't change who you really are deep down. You're tarnished for life... You may as well give up wielding before you commit another inexcusable error in judgment or failure to react...because what you let happen to him in the future...that was all *your* fau-"

An electrified water wave barreled at Hadal Wraith Blackguard, an attack the dark knight slashed overhead and away with ease. Warra replicated the move again, and again, and again; but Hadal Wraith Blackguard deflected each burst in much the same way he diverted the first. The electricity behind Warra's water attacks added little difficulty for Hadal Wraith Blackguard to defend against. And yet, Warra continued attacking. None of his strikes on Hadal Wraith Blackguard were successful.

"They don't have to know the truth, if they're too ignorant to accept it," Hadal Wraith Blackguard said to Warra. "All that matters is that *you* know."

"Warra, how can anything that guy says actually be right?" asked Athelstan.

"Whether what you're saying is true or not, so what?" Daisy said, glaring at Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "Why are you so concerned with him?"

Hadal Wraith Blackguard's Energized Tonfa hummed with sonic vibration and rippling water. "In the process of his decline, he ruined me. I am broken because of *him* . If you so wish to continue siding with him, you will share the punishment of my ultimate vengeance."

Chapter XLV

Murky Water: Temporal Warrior:

Flare Sword once again clashed with Mystic Broom deep in Laboratory Zero-7 and in front of the looming Mother Computer, Bowser's fires raging against Marissa Clone's magically-charged inferno. The Mother Computer had succeeded in manufacturing a replica of the great demon witch and former Kruna Genesis of Fire to an unsettling degree of accuracy, from appearance to attitude to physical, elemental, and magical ability. Ramona did not know what to feel more nervous about – the startlingly accurate clone of Marissa Arkana battling Bowser, or the unknown massive energy signature she could sense relatively nearby.

Through a pull back into the air and sudden thrust ahead, Marissa Clone smacked her broom into Bowser's sword with enough force to knock him off balance. From the demon witch copy then came a continuous loop of rapid-quick slashes of her free hand, each swipe generating an explosion of magic and flames in front of her. The outer edge of the explosions caught Bowser and pummeled him until Marissa Clone's finishing hand swipe created a larger burst that bashed Bowser several yards away. If not for his quick reaction following the hit, Bowser would have suffered a severe impalement from the powerful jab Marissa Clone made with the pole of her broom. Instead, Bowser spun and latched onto Marissa Clone. Displaying speed and force together, he picked the clone up and spiked her onto the laboratory floor faster than she could gulp for air. Before Marissa Clone could even try to get up, she felt a fiery blast lift her and fling her across the spacious room. On contact with some tables, Marissa Clone's body began to sputter and show the same instability the other clones had.

"Hey, maybe the clone's not immortal after all," said Ramona. "Guess you can't copy that aspect of Marissa, huh?"

"Perhaps not," said the Mother Computer. "However, all other parameters have been replicated, as has been demonstrated."

"She's just as tough and powerful as the original Marissa," said Bowser. He then smirked. "The problem for the Mother Computer however is that it can't account for the Marissa we fought in the future."

The Mother Computer sounded confused when it responded. "What do you mean by that?"

Bowser ignited an aura of fire around himself and his Flare Sword. "It'll be obvious soon enough, if it's not already."

In Laboratory 5A-7A, Hadal Wraith Blackguard raised his Energized Tonfa and aimed them square at Warra. He kept the energy blades fixed on Warra for a long time as Nova Daisy, Athelstan, Marut, and Neva all stayed stationary. Before long, he opened his tonfa into a v-shape. The blades of his tools stretching across the group of five Kruna from edge to edge, Hadal Wraith Blackguard shifted his stance to include an aggressive lean. The only person the dark knight did not account for was Chrissy, who hid behind a toppled, inactive Valkyrian Guardian nearby.

"If you don't let me finish what I came back to do, then so be it," said Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "You all will suffer with him, if that is what you really prefer."

"We'd prefer you leaving," said Daisy. Many of the lights still on throughout Laboratory 5A-7A failed, almost all at once. The environment around them turned ghoulishly dark, with nothing but a few sparse dim glows from scattered lights trying mostly in vain with the moonlight shining through the monstrous gash in the ceiling above to brighten up the windowless room.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard's angular red eyes glowed brighter under the shadow of his mask. He pointed his tonfa skyward, allowing their power to build up before jamming their energy blades into the laboratory floor. A whirlpool of water ripped loose that heightened and elongated as it traveled away from its origin and towards the five Kruna Yura. Warra raised his trident and attempted to impose his will on the incoming whirlpool while Marut and Neva blasted back

at the attack. The combined efforts of the three Kruna disbanded the whirlpool, but a second, stronger one followed behind it. This time, Athelstan kicked free some of the flooring and propelled the new whirlpool over and behind everyone. Daisy leapt out from the group in a long jump with incredible horizontal speed in a bid to jam a Crystal Kick into their opponent, only for the mysterious figure's form to fade into a blurry mist the instant before she hit him. The mist glitched like a faltering computer screen numerous times as it shifted and dragged along the Laboratory 5A floor and between all the scattered machines and debris.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard reformed as a true physical whole atop one of the piles of metal, where he wasted no time in launching a funnel of grayed water. The water's occluded texture looked impure as it revolved in a jet at Daisy, but it sounded even worse. Daisy made a jumping somersault away as the Aqua Jet struck and splashed where she had formerly stood, expecting to hear a rushing splash in front of her but instead hearing slimy, mucky gurgling hisses. When she stood upright after landing, Daisy saw the viscous water of the Aqua Jet bubble in a sickly manner.

A flurry of charged ice bullets shot through the room, all striking Hadal Wraith Blackguard and shocking him off of his perch. The dark knight's hoverpack activated and kept him from falling into Daisy's striking distance however, as Daisy had dashed at him to attack when she saw Neva's bullets hit him. Hadal Wraith Blackguard made a loop in the air and joined his arms and tonfa together, diving out of the loop to soar at Warra in a stabbing aerial tackle. Athelstan and Marut both ran at the incoming knight in dark blue armor to swing their tools at him, but they both whiffed and caught nothing but air.

It was difficult to see such a fast-moving dark figure in an already dark room, but maybe not as difficult as trying to find Warra. The Kruna of Water had disappeared from sight after Hadal Wraith Blackguard sped past Athelstan and Marut, likely through the use of his Alkemei Inpei. His Pendant of Concealment reduced his visibility to near-zero – or rather, it should have. Once Hadal Wraith Blackguard caught nothing but air in his dive, he slowed up to a drifting float and turned to his left. Hadal Wraith Blackguard then

began swatting at...nothing. Repeatedly. The angles and direction at which he swung his tonfa did not remain constant, and he did not stay in one spot either. It appeared as though he was chasing something. Even Daisy could not see what Hadal Wraith Blackguard was attacking, but an idea of what, or who, came to her mind and provoked her into advancing towards him.

With as seemingly occupied and distracted as Hadal Wraith Blackguard was, Daisy landed an easy Breaker Punch on him and chained together a back flip kick that sent him a notable distance up high enough for Neva to then get a clear aim of her sniper on him. The Kruna Yura of Ice blitzed him with bullets again, nine out of ten hitting him before he descended to the Laboratory 5A floor. Marut flew at him with the intent of executing a Drill Dash, only for Hadal Wraith Blackguard's body to devolve into a hazy, misty mass once more and hastily ooze away from the air wielder's offensive.

Marut spun out of his Drill Dash twist and slashed his Energized Air Saber in frustration. "How'd he even do that?!"

Warra's body reappeared behind Daisy, his Inpei shutting off. "You mean state-changing his body, or knowing exactly where I was?"

"Uh- well, both!" said Marut, surveying the room.

"I've never seen a water wielder do that before," said Athelstan.

"Have any of us ever seen it?" Daisy flatly said.

Encircled with flame, Bowser lifted his sword over his head and flipped it upside down. Flickers of fire fluttered from the Flare Sword, a clean, shining, brimming display from one who stood tall and proud. The beastly but heroic silhouette within the swirling aura of inferno whipped his tool in a circle and stomped a foot forward, ready to attack the floating clone of Marissa Arkana zooming back and forth in the aerial space of the Laboratory Zero-7 room.

Marissa Clone had also been preparing something as well, for her Malocchio Eye glowed in earnest the entire time Bowser was

building up his fires. A deep, bulging crimson spheroid of energy crackled into existence around Marissa Clone's left index finger, which she then raised and brought across her face. The malicious angle of her main eyes increased with the extra bloodlust her expression gained. She kept herself mobile in the air as she readied the attack that both Bowser and Ramona recognized as the minuscule but fearsome Death Beam.

Ramona gulped. "Careful, Bowser – if that eye's glowing, don't count on her being inaccurate!"

"I remember," Bowser replied, his Alkemei Kracielle now also shining. "I've got all my eyes on her, like she has on me."

All Marissa Clone needed to do was land one hit in the right place, if her Death Beam indeed worked as well as the original Marissa's own. But given what Bowser and Ramona had seen so far, there was little indication that Marissa Clone's Death Beam would prove any less effective. And so when Marissa Clone shot off the devastating little laser, Bowser abandoned any offensive move he had in mind and leapt back and away. The fast-flying Death Beam punched a hole into the floor where Bowser had stood less than a second ago, a thin but deep, burning hole.

His flaming aura still circulating, Bowser shifted to his left to avoid the second Death Beam that came his way. The searing attack burned another hole into the floor and blasted some underlying mountain rock out through the new opening. A third and fourth helping of the hungry laser flew at Bowser in rapid succession and forced him into a haphazard, tumbling flip just to ensure he did not end up dodging the third Death Beam straight into the fourth one. Bowser recovered to his feet in time to evade a fifth consecutive Death Beam Marissa Clone then fired. Though Marissa Clone thought she had him when she flew behind him and shot a sixth Death Beam, Bowser caught sight of it through his Alkemei Kracielle and lunged out of the way of that attack as well. There now existed six smoking holes in the laboratory floor.

Bowser pumped out some extra fire to add to his inferno aura. "To think that somebody could not only combine fire, plasma, and magic, but then condense it into such an attack is ludicrous. It's hard

enough to combine two of them, but all three is just insane..."

"Maybe not as insane as the fact that this computer copied such an ability so accurately," murmured Ramona.

Three more Death Beam bursts came, putting Bowser on the defensive again. Holes accumulated on the floor and the walls as Marissa Clone kept pointing Death Beams at her elusive target. Ramona even had to twist her own body out of the way of one stray Death Beam that missed Bowser. Though she failed to hit Bowser, Marissa Clone got the aim of her Death Beams frighteningly close each time, to the point of even cutting through Bowser's flaming aura on more than one attempt.

Perhaps an inevitability with the lack of care for where she aimed her Death Beams, Marissa Clone fired and missed Bowser but instead hit the Mother Computer behind him. The Death Beam pierced a hole into the side of the Mother Computer's main, cylindrical body. Strangely, Marissa Clone's attack drew a loud, life-like scream reminiscent of a pained cry from an organic being. Such a noise from the Mother Computer caught everyone's surprised attention, which Bowser thought quick to take advantage of. He saw Marissa Clone's distraction as his chance to finally retaliate.

With a firm grip on his sword, Bowser spun and swiped his tool at Marissa Clone. A fan of four fireballs sizzled off the Flare Sword's blade and bombarded the clone of the demon witch. Through the ensuing smoke and dispersion of fire, Bowser jumped and struck down an aerial double kick on Marissa Clone, chained into a swift and fierce slash of his free Blazer Claw. The momentum carried him into a spin that he then executed a double back kick out of, launching Marissa Clone halfway across the room. Bowser landed with enough fire still around him to unleash a Tavado blast on the downed clone, all of the flaming torpedoes he launched swinging and curving into direct contact with Marissa Clone and lighting up the room with red-gold hues.

The question remained over whether the Mother Computer copied the immortal capacities that the original Marissa Arkana possessed; but the answer soon came once the room cleared and calm returned to the scene. Ramona breathed a sigh of relief, for the impact site

where Marissa Clone had landed and took the full fury of Bowser's Tavado now had nothing there but a pile of chunky, fleshy matter and defiled clothing. Bowser stood up tall, flipped his sword in his grip a couple times, and placed it in its holster on the back of his shell before turning around to stare down the Mother Computer once more.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard succeeded in both terrifying the Kruna Yura with the lethal intent behind each attack he executed, and in frustrating them as well with his surreal, reality-challenging evasion. The way he dodged their attacks felt similar to the future Marissa's optical distortions and illusion-like movement she had when she entered her Eternal Malocchio Form. It seemed as though whenever the Kruna had a good setup to chain together a combo, the entirety of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's body would turn into a fluid, watery, misty mass and fly around the room like a dense, semi-amorphous cloud.

"The fact that his equipment changes too leads me to believe that that technique isn't all solely water wielding," said Athelstan.

"You mean like there's some sort of magic power involved too?" said Daisy. "Wouldn't be the first time we fought a spellcaster-wielder."

Hadal Wraith Blackguard swept through the air and sprayed water in a spinning torrent at the five scattered Kruna Yura, water that bubbled and fizzed as it hissed off from his Energized Tonfa's blades. The viscous, opaque water marred with impurities flew in rotating, curved waves onto Laboratory 5A's floor. Though the attack failed to damage any of the Kruna, who had all ducked for cover, it did wreak havoc on the architecture and machinery in the room. Not only did the force of the attack bring about destruction, but the properties of the water itself did as well. Everything that the water hit looked softer and degraded after the fact.

Daisy peeked out from behind a large canister at the secondary damage Hadal Wraith Blackguard's water caused through its mere contact alone, her expression showing some concern. "I don't know a thing about water wielding, but that doesn't seem like any ordinary

water to me."

"Yeah, half of this guy's attacks are coming out all funky-looking," Neva said, crawling out from behind an overturned mech. "And they stink too."

Warra flipped to the top of a nearby engineering device and leapt from it at Hadal Wraith Blackguard, his trident at a position to strike down the knight. But once again, Hadal Wraith Blackguard dispersed into a dense mist and floated out of reach. Without even an attempt at swinging his tool, Warra landed and tracked Hadal Wraith Blackguard's movement. The cloud zipped and drifted across the room without any clear pattern, then made a beeline straight at Warra and reformed into a definite, physical shape upon nearing him. Hadal Wraith Blackguard's tonfa weapons both came thrusting at Warra mere milliseconds after solidifying, but Warra had the right idea in entering a backpedal the moment he had noticed Hadal Wraith Blackguard closing in on him. That backwards momentum kept Warra from enduring a vicious stabbing. Warra again saved himself when he shifted way to his right and off balance to evade the subsequent burst of murky water Hadal Wraith Blackguard shot.

"He's not here to talk," said Athelstan.

"No kidding," said Daisy. "And he's clearly picking favorites."

"You, failed Kruna," Hadal Wraith Blackguard growled at Warra. "Expire!"

Warra rushed at Hadal Wraith Blackguard, his free hand up and charged with sonic power for his Focus Palm. Every thrust and jab of his Focus Palm traveled with exact precision in his aim, but – if for no other reason than Hadal Wraith Blackguard's speed – none connected. By the time Warra committed to maximizing the speed of his offensive, Hadal Wraith Blackguard had dispersed into his amorphous form and slipped away.

Solidifying his body once a safe distance from Warra, Hadal Wraith Blackguard retracted his right tonfa's energy blade and shifted the tool up his arm into a holster in his armored gauntlet. He proceeded to generate and channel sonics into his free hand in a very similar

fashion to how Warra did, though the noise escaping his hand sounded significantly more disturbed and unpleasant. The second Hadal Wraith Blackguard's feet lifted from the laboratory floor, Warra knew he had to move fast. Warra just narrowly escaped a decisive reach of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's charged hand, only to then endure a body-numbing swipe the next second when the knight flared his arm out.

"Perish!" Hadal Wraith Blackguard roared.

As Warra fell in a disoriented mess, Daisy propelled herself at Hadal Wraith Blackguard. The Kruna Yura of Earth landed a knee strike to Hadal Wraith Blackguard's head out of a long jump. Though Hadal Wraith Blackguard's helmet and mask blunted some of the hit, she had exerted more than enough force on him to launch him into a flopping skid along the floor. Only touching down long enough to kick herself forward, Daisy leapt at the darkened knight, flipped into a somersault, and smashed her booted feet into his abdomen before he had even stopped moving.

"Clear away!" Athelstan hollered, midway through a takeoff of his own. Daisy sprang off of Hadal Wraith Blackguard and left him wide open to the monstrous Mountain Hammer swing Athelstan intended to bring down, only for the knight to disperse yet again into fluid and vapor the instant before the hammer hit. Athelstan's attack resulted in an impact crater and more unsettling disruption of the Laboratory 5A-7A complex, but Hadal Wraith Blackguard escaped from taking the brunt of it.

"He keeps doing that," grumbled Daisy. "That's ridiculously annoying!"

Athelstan heaved his hammer up and let his eyes track the shifting cloud of Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "Yeah, I could've made his armor explode off of him if I had connected on that one!"

"We might be looking at this the wrong way," Warra said, shakily back to standing but already charging up his trident again. At a still hover above the 5A section of the lab, Marut raised his saber and amplified the air currents he channeled through its blade with its Volt Fusion boost. The electrical and magnetic enhancement Marut's

accumulating mass of air gained then augmented the natural lightning he made his winds tear into existence.

"What's he whipping out Lightning Blade for?" muttered Neva. "This guy'll just melt into that cloud and dodge like he's been doing..."

Athelstan watched Marut finish his Lightning Blade and then attempt aiming his supercharged Energized Air Saber at the floating, mobile amorphous mass making up Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "Actually, I see what he's doing; and it's not a bad train of thought, if he can catch him, that is..."

"Hey, Neva," Daisy said. "I got an idea too. Think you wanna try laying down a quick-freeze?"

Neva thought about what Daisy had said for a moment before showing a sly grin. "I could try that."

"Your progression is astonishing..." the Mother Computer said. Bowser and Ramona both could hear an oddly darker, more focused tone coming from the machine. "One of the most powerful beings I have on record; and yet, you defeated her all by yourself..."

"A formidable foe she was already," said Bowser. "But we've fought an even more powerful version of her. And a more durable version than some fragile clone."

"Such a claim makes me more curious," the Mother Computer said. "Excellent work. You are a spectacular specimen indeed. You have passed all the required tests for account reset... However...your powers have piqued my interest... Now, I have but one final test for you."

"Um...can you not?" asked Ramona.

The Mother Computer ignored Ramona. "This was forbidden by the previous admin. He did not want to create an archive for this ultimate entity in the database, but there is no room for fear when it comes to advancing science, technology, and evolution. It is time to bring forth a shadowed titan from a forgotten age. Unfortunately, as

fate would have it, only a partial data analysis was possible. Though the data extraction and recreation was a success, the file came out corrupted. Still, this imperfect clone should provide a hefty challenge and verification of your worth for what is to come. We shall see how you compare."

"Uh – can you not?!" Ramona asked again.

"You've made it this far in," said the Mother Computer. "You no longer have a choice in the matter."

"I've passed three of these so-called 'tests,' ya damn computer," Bowser grumbled. "What good is a fourth one going to do?"

"This is necessary, Bowser Koopa," said the Mother Computer. "I will not yield to lesser beings who are unworthy. Whether you are ready or not, you have come too far. Your choice has run out. You *will* partake in this fourth and final test."

Bowser gave a low, vexed growl. "Fine, then. Hurry it up and get it over with. We'll see if you still wanna run these tests after I break apart your next clone in record time. And if you *still* don't let us into the Universal Database after this next waste of time, you're getting blown into next century. I've had it up to *here* with your stalling!"

The Mother Computer's eye focused on Bowser with undivided attention. "Patience, Bowser Koopa. I assure you, very little time spent here since your arrival has been wasted; and none of these proceedings have been done out of a desire to stall. The Universal Database is the least of our concerns right now. You would be better served using the finite time you have left available to you to prepare yourself for this upcoming, most crucial clash... Unlocking 'Thousand-Year_Door' executable. Standby..."

Chapter XLVI

Darkness Returns:

Hovering high in Laboratory 5A-7A, Marut kept his Lightning Blade technique on standby. He was smart enough by now to not waste such a staggering amount of power on the elusive Hadal Wraith Blackguard, who could literally melt his body into a floating wet mass of water and vapor gas nearly on demand. Hadal Wraith Blackguard also was aware of the technique, considering how much bright brilliance Marut's lightning produced in the dark room. Warra and Neva both had their main elemental tools primed with power as well, which left just Athelstan and Nova Daisy available to directly handle and occupy Hadal Wraith Blackguard. Chrissy seemed complacent with just hiding behind an inactive Valkyrian Guardian.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard reformed into his solid state just long enough to perch himself on top of a pile of MAE robots and pump out his unpleasant, noxious water from the power blades of his Energized Tonfa. Barely detectable, the dark stream of fluid shot through the shadowed room at Neva. Still with compromised mobility, Neva ate the pain her right ankle gave her and propelled herself behind a row of canisters to avoid the more severe pain Hadal Wraith Blackguard's water would have inflicted on her. Under her moaning and groaning, Neva could hear Hadal Wraith Blackguard's water dissolving some of her cover.

"Enough with that stinky, weird water!" Neva yelled. "That's gross!"

"I also think that it's acidic too," said Athelstan, gesturing to the spots Hadal Wraith Blackguard's water hit. "It's been making the structures that it contacts decay and breakdown. I don't know what kind of water wielder has the power to make *that* kind of liquid..."

"One rife with impurities, I bet," Daisy said. "I can feel how tainted his energy signature alone is..."

Neva picked up her Freeze Coil Sniper before the power she had gathered in it dissipated, her injury-affected uncouth evasion having

made her lose her grip on it. In the process, she noticed the dangling gem of her blackened Null Alkemei Hien and decided to hold off on her original plan and try something else. She only hoped that the Hien still worked, considering Kokoro had damaged it so extensively; but the Hien's gem still glowed with her elemental energy, so she figured that she may as well see if it can still work its magic.

"You wanna play with some dirty water, huh..." grumbled Neva, channeling her Null Alkemei Hien's ability. The recollections of each time Hadal Wraith Blackguard unleashed his impure water flashed through Neva's mind and reflected in her own power. Keeping her sniper imbued with her true powers, Neva took out her Chill Sickle and attempted directing her emulated power into it.

Meanwhile, Hadal Wraith Blackguard had struck and wrestled Daisy and Athelstan respectively out of the way of Warra, who now backpedaled with his charged Energized Ocean Trident held up high in front of him. Hadal Wraith Blackguard's hostile stare through the glowing red eyes under his mask showed no sense of fear or apprehension at the sight of Warra's charged tool. On the contrary, Warra was the one that seemed flustered.

"You didn't learn anything," Hadal Wraith Blackguard said. "You'll never learn anything. Even if you think you'll change, even if you try your damnedest, you'll revert right back to what you've been all along, choker. Freeze up when you're needed the most and watch everyone around you die."

"You're gonna learn something about freezing up in a minute..." Neva grumbled, reaching a peak in her Chill Sickle's charge.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard was already shifting before Warra even tried to blast him. The Kruna of Water's electrified elemental blast missed the mysterious knight, who had dispersed into his fluid cloud form the instant before the attack came solely to make a rapid but short dodge to his right. Once safe from the attack, Hadal Wraith Blackguard solidified and continued on his way towards Warra without any break in stride. The energy blades of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's tonfa weapons flickered with a sudden surge in their power currents as he violently jerked them at his sides.

"Now feel the weight of your failures and your future sins in full force," Hadal Wraith Blackguard murmured, murky water churning out around his tonfa.

Warra peered up and saw Marut ready to unleash his Lightning Blade from above. "Marut, No! Not yet!"

Hadal Wraith Blackguard then glanced upward at the hovering Kruna of Air as well. "There is no chance that I can lose sight or awareness of an attack as conspicuous as that in an environment like this. I don't even have to directly look at it to know if and when it's coming."

But you'll be too busy squirming around in your own nasty water to dodge , Neva said in thought. *Enjoy the wet shock-*

Neva stepped out from her cover and blasted the elemental power built up in her Chill Sickle. She thought that through her Alkemei Hien's power, she would release a copy of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's tainted water out of her secondary elemental tool. But instead, her usual ice came out. Perhaps even more confusing, it came out in a startlingly aggressive, high-powered manner; and the Volt Fusion properties of the Chill Sickle itself further amplified what appeared to be an already bolstered blast. Hadal Wraith Blackguard turned and saw the monstrous blast of ice, frost, electricity, and magnetic power barreling his way, showing an instant of genuine terror before it smashed into him and overwhelmed him. Neva's titanic burst slammed Hadal Wraith Blackguard through several walls of equipment and machines before pounding him into the laboratory wall itself and dispersing from the impact site in a frosty, shocking explosion.

Next to no time spared for thought, Marut aimed and unfurled his Lightning Blade at the exact center of where the icy explosion had taken place. Marut's great, fearsome sword of lightning extended from his actual saber's blade and struck Hadal Wraith Blackguard, also reacting with the residual power still floating around from Neva's attack, which added even more onto the damage toll racked up on Hadal Wraith Blackguard. Following the ferocious attacks Neva and Marut had dealt, darkness and stillness began to return to the room. Now, the five Kruna Yura waited for the remainder of the

magnetically-disturbed and electrified icy cloud surrounding Hadal Wraith Blackguard to disappear...

In Laboratory Zero-7, Bowser and Ramona stared at the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat as a cyclone of darkness swirled out and took on a physical form. The ghostly black and purple apparition that materialized into a tangible body spread its clawed arms and grew to an imposing size, even compared to Bowser. The being's body tapered up from a tail-like lower half to a sparkling, shadowy torso holding a faceless head with lavender-colored hair reminiscent of ribbons and a tall, jeweled, four-point gold crown. Even as just a clone, her very presence influenced the room itself and shrouded it in near-total darkness. Once fully formed, the shadowy figure floated towards the two Kruna and hovered in front of them with her arms out and her clawed hands open at them.

"Now, your true test, Bowser Koopa," said the Mother Computer. "Let us now witness the extent of your powers."

Bowser grumbled, groaned, and snarled as Shadow Queen Clone rocked the room with her titanic power. "For what purpose would you do this? I mean, really! This is what *insane* people would call 'going too far!' "

"I must assess your maximum, for the good of the mission," said the Mother Computer. "It is for our convergence to The Absolute, Bowser Koopa..."

The infrastructure of the room cracked and crumbled from Shadow Queen Clone's unseen aura alone, which further disturbed the room when she made it visible and powered-up. Her body and her aura were near-indistinguishable from one another. The two Kruna could barely see the translucent darkness surrounding the opaque being of darkness in the darkened room.

"I remember thinking no one could ever be scarier than Marissa was," mumbled Ramona. "I take that back..."

"It's just a clone, Ramona," murmured Bowser. "It's not the real

thing..."

Ramona gulped. "I know, but still... Even so...and despite the computer admitting it is an imperfect clone..."

For a split second, Bowser thought he had just heard the Mother Computer chuckle again. He growled and summoned a barrier of flames around him. "What's so funny?!"

"Are you speaking to me?" the Mother Computer asked. "Nothing. I am just expressing amusement and joviality over the prospect of recording and analyzing the data I am anticipating..."

"Odd way of putting it," said Ramona, nervously sweating.

Two sparkles flashed on Shadow Queen Clone's face, one for each spot where an eye would have been. Bowser and Ramona both felt clouds of dense darkness form around them, which suddenly popped and blasted them both away into the wall by the room's entrance. Despite the simplicity of the technique, the attack itself both elicited a considerable pain response and sapped power from them.

"True terror and power," moaned Shadow Queen Clone. Her hands floated towards the two Kruna, halfway to them before they even got up. Though Ramona slipped away, Bowser was too big of a target for the large and swift hands to not catch. Within seconds, Bowser felt an intense crushing sensation throughout his body that both suffocated him and leeched power from him. Ramona rushed to the rescue, a speedy and potent slash of light from her Solar Greatsword loosening Shadow Queen Clone's hold on Bowser enough for him to ignite an expanding barrier of flames around him and free himself. Having blasted the massive clawed dark hand off of him, Bowser stumbled away from it in a hurry. Ramona lashed a wave of light at the other of Shadow Queen Clone's hands as well, her and Bowser's moves successful in driving back their deadly opponent's appendages.

But once near Shadow Queen Clone, the floating hands of darkness began rotating around one another and spinning. Shadow Queen Clone's hands then gained a bright purple glow enveloped in near-

opaque darkness. The bulk of the culminated power focused into the center of space around which Shadow Queen Clone's hands spun, and the mass of energy's density increased dramatically in seconds.

Bowser gritted his teeth, wide-eyed at the shadow power enlarging before him and Ramona. "What are you doing?! That's way too much!"

Shadow Queen Clone released the Dark Cannon her hands held, a barreling, overpowering beam that warped the very space itself that it ran along on its way to Bowser and Ramona. The two Kruna split and dove to either side of it before it could hit them. A cacophony of noise then registered in their ears, a result of the Dark Cannon ripping through the walls and entrance to Laboratory Zero-7. Bowser and Ramona glanced behind them, watching the great beam tear through Heavenly Hall and burrow into the rocky ceiling of the grand vestibule that led back down and connected into MAE Command Center. The beam itself did not last a lengthy amount of time, but long enough to carve well into the building's structure and mountain itself. Parts of the ceiling near the Heavenly Hall entrance soon collapsed after the Dark Cannon's conclusion.

"Know true pain," Shadow Queen Clone moaned, generating more power.

"Hey, Neva!" Daisy called out, regrouping with her, Warra, and Athelstan. "What was up with that? How'd you even manage to throw out that much power?!"

"I dunno!" Neva replied, staring at her Chill Sickle. "I tried using the Hien to copy that water he used, but I just got bigger ice instead! Kokoro really did screw this pendant up, I think..."

"Maybe him screwing it up wasn't a bad thing," said Athelstan, watching the last of the icy fog dissipate. "If it can make your elemental power stronger now, then that's still useful!"

"Yes, but how?" said Warra. "The whole mechanism for using it could've changed."

"No, it worked like it usually did," said Neva. "I remembered the guy using his attacks; and it reacted to that, and I felt my energy run through it and into my sickle..."

From her cover, Chrissy stared at the gathered Kruna in front of her and then up at the lone floating Kruna in green, sky blue, and silver. *No wonder I could never beat them...* she thought. *These people are true freaks of nature...*

Daisy brushed aside the bangs of her Nova Form hair hanging down over her forehead, her shiny golden eyes focused on the now clear area where Hadal Wraith Blackguard had endured Neva's and Marut's exceptionally powerful attacks. From what Daisy could tell, the dark knight was nowhere to be found. No way did her two friends manage to obliterate his body, that much she was sure of. She could still sense him too.

"He moved," Daisy said.

"Damn, I was hoping that would've at least crippled him some..." said Neva.

"His energy signature doesn't feel as steady," said Warra. "But it's still quite high and dangerous."

"Could use Bowser and that all-seeing pendant of his right about now," said Athelstan.

Neva refocused her efforts on charging her Freeze Coil Sniper with elemental power. "I'm surprised I didn't lose any energy on that last attack; but I don't know if I wanna try that again, or go back to what I was originally gonna do."

"If you can, maybe try it a second time," said Daisy. "I doubt he'll let himself be that stationary again. Just at least be ready for the next time he dissolves into a cloud. I'm thinking that's what he is right now, actually..."

Warra's eyes perked up, his ears catching a loud crashing, crumbling noise echoing from somewhere. "Well that doesn't sound right..."

"I heard it," said Daisy. "But that couldn't have been from Hadal Wraith Blackguard, right?"

"I bet he finally chickened out and ran off," Neva said, snickering. "Blowing his way out of here like he blew his way in here..."

"No, that can't be..." Warra said. "That sounded too far away...he couldn't have escaped that far already..."

Athelstan shrugged. "Maybe Bowser and Ramona are blowing something up?"

Daisy grimaced. "I don't know...I almost feel like I'm sensing something terrible..."

Marut whipped around and glanced at what he thought was a shadowy figure moving past him. He immediately went on the defensive and backed up, a reverse somersault further carrying him away. The figure turned out to be the cloud of Hadal Wraith Blackguard, which soon reformed into the mysterious knight in his full – albeit heavily damaged – glory. In rapid fashion, Hadal Wraith Blackguard swung both of his Energized Tonfa at Marut together in an angry "X" strike. Though Marut evaded and flew away, he could feel the distortion of air Hadal Wraith Blackguard's attack produced; for the vibration and fuzziness rattled his body as he fled.

"Whoa! This boy got mad!" hollered Marut. He zipped high and down in an arc back to the bottom level of the lab with the other Kruna, escaping Hadal Wraith Blackguard's subsequent bout of slashing. The five Kruna regrouped and spread into a formation that kept Neva back behind some machines for cover and put Daisy and Marut front and center, Warra and Athelstan flanked to either side. At that moment, they noticed something eerily chilling about their superpowered opponent once he landed in front of them and lit up the room with the immense power he siphoned into his tonfa's energy blades.

"Hey, wait a minute – am I looking at this guy clearly," murmured Neva. "... Or is all the pain making me delusional..."

A notable amount of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's armor had been

damaged or blasted off of him following Neva's and Marut's attacks. That included the top portion of the helmet mask combo he wore. Though he still had his mask covering the majority of his face, his hair now flew free. In addition, his eyes no longer had a dark shroud over them. Now, the Kruna could see and recognize some familiar features; features that surprised all of them but Warra and that made Marut, Athelstan, and Neva all peer at Daisy.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard now glared at the Kruna not with glowing red orbs but shining gold eyes, eyes nearly identical to Nova Daisy's. Also very similar but not in the same manner, Hadal Wraith Blackguard's hair spiked outward as jagged protrusions. Whereas Daisy's hair jutted primarily out in front of her and some behind her as well when in Nova Form, Hadal Wraith Blackguard's mainly spiked out to the sides and upward in curved, wavy ripples. The loose but undeniable resemblances raised cause for concern in the Kruna, and in Chrissy too.

Marut pointed at Hadal Wraith Blackguard, his hand a little shaky. "Is that guy a Nova Form wielder? Like Daisy?"

Bowser and Ramona held up their swords, fire and light ablaze around their respective tools. Their opponent surrounded herself with a terrifying torrent of darkness unlike that which they had ever seen from anyone. Despite the intense damage done to Heavenly Hall and Laboratory Zero-7, the Mother Computer did not make any sort of effort to control Shadow Queen Clone's disregard for the structural integrity of the MAE building complex they occupied. It instead seemed preoccupied with studying and analyzing statistical data it recorded and pulled from the three wielders present with it in the room. The many monitors the Mother Computer had connected to it all showed undulating graphs, numbers, charts, and algorithms specifically dedicated to Bowser, Ramona, and Shadow Queen Clone.

"I don't like the fact that...that we have to deal with this, m-monster, in this confined place..." whimpered Ramona.

"Andrew and King Boo combined couldn't make shadow power that

incredibly strong..." murmured Bowser.

"I'd...I'd hope they'd at least come close," Ramona mumbled, quivering. "It'd help some to not think of there being such a power gap..."

"I do hope you survive this, Bowser Koopa," said the Mother Computer. "You seem like a promising admin..."

Bowser dashed at Shadow Queen Clone, Flare Sword up to strike. "No clone will ever stack up to the real thing!"

Shadow Queen Clone concentrated her dark aura and revolved it around her into a dark funnel. Bowser struck, only for the darkness to catch and clash with his flaming sword. Ramona followed seconds later with a swing of her own, but with no better result. Both Kruna did their best to enforce their will and strength on the aura, hopeful that they could break through. The power struggle spread excess fire, light, and shadow throughout the room, all while the Mother Computer attentively observed the confrontation and the climbing levels of power the three beings generated.

The instant the Mother Computer picked up on a huge spike in power coming from Shadow Queen Clone, her dark aura overpowered Bowser and Ramona. Both Kruna flew back and away from one another into the wall near the far corners of the room opposite the Mother Computer, almost rolling out into Heavenly Hall. Smokey shadow wisps fluttered off their bodies as they felt portions of their energy leave them. The two Kruna barely got the chance to get up and retrieve the swords they dropped before Shadow Queen Clone's hands flew at them. A hand targeted each of the Kruna, their flight curved in arcs to smack the two elemental wielders.

As Bowser retreated into his shell, Ramona grabbed her sword in reverse-grip and swung it up in front of her in defense. The right Shadow Queen Clone hand struck Bowser out into Heavenly Hall, though his shell blunted much of the force. Ramona blocked the left Shadow Queen Clone hand and shot light power through her sword, a counter from the Kruna of Light on the way. Out of a nimble twirl of her body, Ramona curled around the floating dark hand and quick-swiped her Solar Greatsword into it. Bowser came out of his shell in

time to see a gash of white-gold light power eaten into the hand Ramona had struck. The gleaming, shining ripple in the hand vibrated in jagged segments as Shadow Queen Clone groaned and moaned.

Visibly perturbed, Shadow Queen Clone rushed her other hand at Ramona. Again, Ramona blocked and countered in a very similar fashion. The retaliatory slash Ramona made caused even more damage than her previous one. Shadow Queen Clone soon retracted her hands back to her main body, both of them scarred with a bright, rippling light. Perhaps a little more sure of herself, Ramona flipped her sword back to her primary, normal grip and grasped its handle with both hands. Her eyes stayed focused on Shadow Queen Clone as she set up in a defensive stance, her breathing shallow but controlled. Bowser followed Ramona's lead and set up defensively with his Flare Sword.

"Your energy reserves are quite remarkable," said the Mother Computer. "I am eager to bear witness to your abilities in earnest."

Shadow Queen Clone smiled and clenched her hands into fists, shadow power now gathering in abundance around her fingers. Several moments passed in which her energy circulated through her hands. When she opened up her palms, the damage Ramona had done was no longer visible.

"Fine," Bowser grumbled. "Bear witness to us dismantling your clone. We can take care of her; right, Ramona?"

Ramona nodded, her wide-eyed expression stern but holding obvious concern. "She's just another shadow wielder is all..."

"A pity how little you know," said the Mother Computer. "But then again, what else is to be expected from mere limited and flawed mortals..."

Chapter XLVII

The Most Powerful Fallen Warrior:

Spread out along the Laboratory 5A floor and with Chrissy well behind them taking refuge under the cover of an inactive Valkyrian Guardian, the five Kruna Yura stared at their mysterious opponent, Hadal Wraith Blackguard, who the Kruna now presumed to be a Nova Form user like Daisy. His now exposed hair and eyes, the bronze-like shine to the little bit of skin visible, and his previously demonstrated exceptional control over water paired with an ostensibly remarkable energy signature all corroborated the status of Hadal Wraith Blackguard as an elemental wielder in Nova Form, especially when compared to Nova Daisy. Out of everyone there besides Hadal Wraith Blackguard himself, only Warra seemed lacking in the surprise department.

Neva scowled. "No wonder he's been such a pain in the ass this whole time..."

"So, we're not all tripping, right?" said Marut. "That dude's definitely got some of that Nova Form action, huh?"

Warra nodded. "Yes, he has it. And he has been in it this whole time... He has learned the Full Power Nova Form, like Daisy, so he can stay in Nova Form indefinitely without any energy loss or ill-effect, just like she can..."

Daisy managed to cock a smirk momentarily, but it faded to unease in seconds. "Guess this is proof that mine's not a random fluke..."

"What does it take to reach Nova Form in the first place?" Athelstan said. "Never mind him developing Full Power Nova Form – how did he even gain it at all? Because it seems to me that Daisy and this Hadal guy are two completely different people..."

"I gained it *my* way," Hadal Wraith Blackguard responded. He raised both of his Energized Tonfa up in front of him and crossed their power blades in an "X" shape. "And I've had plenty more time in it

than your friend in black there has... *Exponentially* more."

Hadal Wraith Blackguard's body suddenly splashed apart. He then pulled together and reformed a second later bare inches away from Daisy, ready to strike her down in fatal fashion. Daisy leapt backwards and got herself out of harm's way thanks to her reflexes, but Hadal Wraith Blackguard still clipped her in her left shoulder. Again, Hadal Wraith Blackguard's body dispersed into a cloud of water and zoomed across the room. The cloud stopped and solidified into the dark knight in front of Warra, whose timely reaction of swinging his Energized Ocean Trident upward gave him defense against the slashes Hadal Wraith Blackguard attempted laying down on him.

Almost immediately, Hadal Wraith Blackguard backed off from the group. More of his tainted, murky water pooled around the energy blades of his tonfa, which he then swiped and ripped loose at the Kruna. The splashing, amorphous masses of water that he swung off of his tonfa traveled as individual "V"-angled, crescent-shaped waves, of which he sent out several in burst fire. With no clear aim, some of the Water Crescents forced the Kruna into evasion. Other Water Crescents pelted the ground and surrounding structures they hit, adding to the cumulative damage Laboratory 5A-7A had already sustained.

Marut launched into the air in a shuttle loop and charged at Hadal Wraith Blackguard, his Energized Air Saber loaded with power for a nasty quick-strike. The instant Marut soared close, Hadal Wraith Blackguard disbanded into a cloud again and curled behind the speedy Kruna of Air as he neared. Hadal Wraith Blackguard reformed astonishingly quick and slashed a handful of Water Crescents at Marut, who looked behind him as he flew in time to see them carve through the air at him. An abrupt cut further upward got Marut away from the Water Crescents' tracks, but he could not spot the Nova Form knight when he looped back down.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard reformed above the Laboratory 5A floor and behind the other Kruna, his tonfa blades bubbling with a ghastly fluid. The dirty, opaque blues, greens, and purples of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's waters swirled in a vortex around both his tonfa, erupting outward when he struck the tonfa's blades together

overhead. An enormous, gurgling mass of water flew off the tonfa, resembling a bulbous phantom with three large, glowing black blotches arranged and contorted in a way to appear as a fiendish, maybe even tormented, grin. Though slow-moving, the sizable attack moved quick enough to cause alarm in Neva, the nearest one in range. She attempted jumping to her right, only for her injured right ankle to give out and make her flop to the floor with almost no change in position. Luckily, Daisy dashed at Neva and leapt ahead of her to lay an Iaido smack of her Laser Drill Staff into the ghoulish water burst. Screams and moans escaped from the water on contact as Daisy drilled it off-course upward and away.

"Thanks..." Neva said, gingerly getting back to her feet. Daisy glanced at her and gave her a warm thumbs up.

"What kind of a water technique was *that* supposed to be?" Athelstan said, his eyes locked on the ascending ghastly water mass. The burst collided with a station on one side of Laboratory 6A, dissolving and corroding a substantial amount of material that then oozed down to the 5A floor.

"Purgatorial Drowner," Warra said, watching Hadal Wraith Blackguard revert to cloud form and shoot through the air. "I don't feel as though those blasts are composed solely of water."

"I still needa try getting my shot off on him," said Neva. "But if he's moving that fast as a cloud now, I don't know how accurate I can even be."

Warra nodded and charged his trident. "Same. And it doesn't help that he's hard to see with the lack of light here."

Bowser and Ramona stood offset one another in Laboratory Zero-7, both Kruna in defensive stances against the imposing, nightmarish clone of the Shadow Queen that the Mother Computer had generated. Interestingly, the thick, ribbon-like strands making up Shadow Queen Clone's hair now took on a dull glow. Her body also morphed from a black-purple meld to a murky gray-purple. Before long, Bowser and Ramona could see dark rainbows flowing through

the entire length of Shadow Queen Clone's hair. The two Kruna also noticed a stark uptick in power coming from their enemy.

The next thing they knew, Bowser and Ramona saw two dark lines shooting out of where eyes would have been if Shadow Queen Clone had a true face. With how disconcerting the lines looked, the two Kruna backed away and spread from one another. Dark explosions then traveled along the lines all the way down their length until they reached the floor, where the lines had stopped tracking. Shadow wisps and fluttering dark energy puffed out from each explosion; though with how dark Shadow Queen Clone's presence alone had made the room, they proved difficult to detect and see, aside from the slight illuminations from the blast epicenters. Both Kruna felt shadow energy clip them as a result, for they failed to notice the reach the explosions had.

As time went on, it seemed as though the room continued darkening. It soon became difficult to make out anything for anyone who did not have the eyes of an earth wielder or shadow wielder. Luckily, both Kruna could remedy the sight disadvantage at least somewhat. The two kept their tools charged with their elemental powers to restore some brightness. Through Bowser's fire around his Flare Sword and Ramona's light shining off of her Solar Greatsword, they each could view the immediate area surrounding them. But still, with Shadow Queen Clone's power continuing to mount, their vision of the room – and even some of Heavenly Hall as well – diminished to almost nothing. Aside from the Mother Computer's monitors and lights, Shadow Queen Clone's crown and hair, their own swords, and the first section of Heavenly Hall way behind them, Bowser and Ramona stood in a world of blackness.

"Ramona, your left!" Bowser suddenly shouted.

Ramona barely turned in time and cut to her right in a hurry, avoiding the sweeping shadow hand that tried smacking her. She lunged at and sliced her sword into it before it flew back into the darkness. Bowser's Kracielle-enhanced vision also alerted him to the hand that tried smashing down on him from above, which he then retreated into his shell to defend against. The shadow hand slammed onto Bowser, but pierced itself into his shell's spikes in the process. Seeing the hand stuck, Ramona dashed at it and lashed

her blade into it, dislodging the hand and lifting it up into the air with a golden laceration of light cut through its palm.

Bowser spun out of his shell and swung fire off of his sword at where he saw Shadow Queen Clone's crown and hair floating, two markers that served as indicators for where the shadowy body hovered in the dark veil overtaking Heavenly Hall. Following Bowser's successful connection, Ramona zapped Shadow Queen Clone with a light burst out of her blade. With the intent of continuing the offensive, Bowser inhaled and got set to launch his Super Flame Breath. He soon found himself aborting the technique when he felt a multitude of smaller dark hands reach up from the ground and grab at his legs. A portal opened, its circumference encompassing all of the dark hands as they pulled on Bowser and tried to drag him down.

Ramona gasped and hurriedly pumped out more light power into her blade. She swiped a large portion of it out at much of the hands grabbing at Bowser while he sliced his sword through them. As he could feel himself sinking into the portal, he exerted an exhausting amount of force just on stepping up and out of it. Even as he pulled away from the portal, he and Ramona kept attacking at the hands that continued trying to latch onto and drag him back into it.

"Get off of me!" Bowser screamed. Infuriated, he flared a flaming force field around his form and spun into a Whirling Fortress inferno. The act of desperation eradicated the remaining dark hands harassing him; but he came out of his shell in time to see one of Shadow Queen Clone's main hands grabbing Ramona and leeching energy from her. Wasting no time, Bowser flung himself at the huge hand and double-kicked it off and away from Ramona. The two Kruna heard Shadow Queen Clone chuckling as they saw her crown and hair float about in the darkness.

"Just what kind of being are we up against," murmured Ramona. "This is crazy...how are we supposed to beat her by ourselves?"

"It's just a clone," said Bowser. "A few good, hard hits, and she's done, just like the rest."

Ramona frowned. "How hard and how many though?"

"Enough of them," Bowser answered, raising his flaming sword over his head. "Hit me with some light! Let's make a rainbow better than hers."

Ramona nodded and crossed her sword in front of her body, its blade shimmering and shining with growing light. She reached a heavy charge in exceptionally quick time, considering how long of a night it had been. Once ready, she released the lion's share of the light gathered in her sword onto the fire around Bowser's tool. Bowser mixed his fire into her light, dispersed both around his body, and allowed the scattered light and fire to cloak him in a glimmering, sparkling coat of flaming color.

"Hold this," Rainbow Bowser said, lobbing his Flare Sword at Ramona. His hands free, he concentrated power into his Blazer Claws and tore along the laboratory floor at Shadow Queen Clone's crown and hair. The brilliant rainbow aura surrounding Bowser illuminated the area around him and made Shadow Queen Clone fully visible when he neared her. What followed after Bowser rammed his shell into Shadow Queen Clone was a barrage of powered-up punches, kicks, claw swipes, and a furious flaming finisher of rainbow fire blasts that made the room look like a rave at a dark dance club maximizing all of its lighting effects at once. Ramona tossed Bowser back his elemental tool when he backed off and reverted back to normal, and he relit it with more bright fire.

"What an impressive ability," said the Mother Computer. "A shame it doesn't seem like you can sustain it."

"I held it long enough," Bowser replied. He stared down Shadow Queen Clone, who once more was only visible through locating her crown and hair in the dark room. However, her hair no longer had any special rainbow tones to it.

"Foooooools," Shadow Queen Clone angrily hissed, pain audible in her voice. Her power escalated, and her hair flashed flowing rainbow gradients once more. An enormous, titanic mass of shadow power erupted and pooled in front of Shadow Queen Clone. When Shadow Queen Clone began to let her hands revolve around the shadowy spheroid at an accelerating speed, Bowser and Ramona recognized a second Dark Cannon in the making. The technique took only

seconds to prepare and even less time to fire; and unfortunately for the two Kruna, the beam came out much wider and more powerful than last time.

Both Bowser and Ramona felt their hearts sink as they cut away and just narrowly avoided what likely would have been a critical, battle-deciding blow from the mighty Dark Cannon. They saw what looked like a train of shadow power chug through the air out into Heavenly Hall and crash into the walls and ceiling back near where the first Dark Cannon had hit. Unlike the first one however, this second Dark Cannon did not let the manufactured structures or the natural mountain rock behind and above it stop its progression. The extensive dark energy cleaved deep and burrowed far; how far, Bowser and Ramona wondered as they watched the blast continue rupturing the space it traveled through and heard the damage it racked up.

Sounds of explosions soon rattled Laboratory 5A-7A, and violent jolting and shaking followed immediately. However, nothing in the lab itself had caused such a vicious tremor. From what everyone there could tell, it came from somewhere outside of the room. They soon heard crashes and crunching, as if something had brought down portions of the building.

"Sounds like it's on this level," said Warra. "Maybe a little higher..."

Random loose debris rolled and fell from above the instant before a portion of an immense dark beam ripped along and parallel with a far wall up at the very top of the 7A sector of the lab. Several chunks of building and infrastructure collapsed from Floor Seven as the dark beam passed through, some plummeting down to 6A and 5A below and forcing some of the Kruna to dodge. The great blast had roared in like a primal beast but then faded moments later in exponential decay. None of the Kruna felt at all comfortable with the seemingly random occurrence, nor did Chrissy. Even Hadal Wraith Blackguard looked unnerved with the development and needed to fly around some of the debris that fell.

"For Luma's sake – what else could possibly be going on in this

building right now?" asked Athelstan. "That's not Dr. Ezhno meddling around with something, is it?"

Daisy focused and stared intensely at the wall she thought she had heard the noise coming through. "I don't know, but the energy signature is crazy. I've never sensed anything like it before..."

"Heh, sure you have," said Neva. "Remember that Osiris creep?"

Daisy nodded. "I remember alright; how could I forget him..."

By the time Shadow Queen Clone's Dark Cannon had run its course, a gaping tunnel now sat in the Heavenly Hall entrance. The blast had burrowed into the ceiling, ate through the hilly mountain, reached the main body of MAE Command Center, and had also likely burst out into the open night sky. Shadow Queen Clone's hands stopped revolving in circles and returned to her sides, her persistent smirk now appearing more smug and her hair now normal once again.

"Wha...what did she just do?!" Ramona whimpered.

"You know what she did – why are you asking?" Bowser responded. "We both saw it..."

Ramona gulped. "I know, but... I just hope it's not worse than what I just saw..."

Shadow Queen Clone chuckled. "Please, don't think me vain...but you are impressed with my handiwork, are you not?"

"The cloning process may not have been as imperfect as previously anticipated..." the Mother Computer said out loud. "However..."

Ramona flipped her sword back under into a reverse-grip and propped it against her right arm and across her body. "Bowser, please tell me you've got a plan."

Similarly, Bowser turned his sword across his own body and rested the face of its blade against his shoulder. "Not exactly... I'm blanking

a little...kind of a little more concerned with just surviving, at this point..."

Ramona flinched and shivered. "We can beat her, right?..."

"Probably..." Bowser mumbled. "If we don't get caught in an attack like that, we could..."

"Disappointing, your short-lived resistance..." Shadow Queen Clone moaned. "Now bow to the ultimate life form, and I might spare you."

"Is she aware of who she is?" Ramona said in wonder.

"Doesn't matter – I'm not bowing," said Bowser. He swept his sword out wide and converted some of the fires it held into energy that then amplified into plasma. Almost instantly, the scope of visibility around Bowser doubled and brightened up the room just enough to make Shadow Queen Clone's body discernible from the rest of the darkness. But from what Ramona could tell, Bowser did not generate the plasma with the intention of creating a passive effect.

"I can see her again," Ramona said. After another flip of her sword, she swept it down in front of her and bolstered the light power emanating from its blade. Though she still had her Sun Shield with her strapped on her back – as well as the Lunar Broadsword she had taken possession of earlier that night in Twilight City – she opted to maintain a two-handed grip on her Solar Greatsword.

"Ultimate life form," grumbled Bowser. "You don't even have legs!"

A violent thrust ahead of his sword, and Bowser's plasma rocketed off its blade at Shadow Queen Clone. He scored a direct hit – in fact, he scored a critical hit, straight through her torso. With still enough power to spare, the plasma pierced through Shadow Queen Clone and burned into the wall behind her. The plasma just narrowly missed one of the tubules connecting the Mother Computer to one of its many extensions and external devices.

Just when Bowser thought he had maimed Shadow Queen Clone, two dark fists curved around the sides of the room and bulldozed both of the Kruna in their backs. The fists leeched some power from

the Kruna as they hit, which pooled in their palms and transferred to Shadow Queen Clone's main body when the hands returned to her. Mere seconds later, the hole that Bowser had burned through Shadow Queen Clone overflowed with darkness. Density in the immediate area of the wound increased until the excess darkness around it dissipated and revealed that the hole had closed.

"Ack- did she just regenerate that?!" Bowser grunted. "How is that possible?!"

"How is it not possible, when the subject in question is a literal elemental?" said the Mother Computer.

The next instant, Bowser felt Shadow Queen Clone's hands wrap around his body. The massive hands clenched on him, rendering him effectively trapped in a grapple. Ramona sprang to her feet and picked her sword up in time to see Shadow Queen Clone float towards the captive Kruna Yura of Fire and laugh. A sickly glow emanated from the dark hands with irregular pulses, each pulse responsible for a labored yelp that escaped Bowser as he felt even more of his power leave him.

"Wha...no!" Ramona cried, anxious and fearful. "Stop! Let him go!"

Shadow Queen Clone chuckled more. "You honestly believe that I will stop, just because you told me to? Your command means nothing to me. I will teach you your proper place soon enough, mortal."

Ramona gritted her teeth, her grip on her glowing sword tightening. Sweat beaded on her forehead like never before. But before she could try to even wrestle Bowser free, she felt the hold of several smaller hands grab at her feet and lower legs. She looked down and saw an ellipse of shadow hands grabbing her and holding her in place.

"I need the energy to heal myself of the harm you've caused me," Shadow Queen Clone said. "What's left over in him should be enough to restore me to full health, and then yours will replenish what I've already exhausted in this battle. You've lasted long enough, but it is time this reached a conclusion."

While Neva, Warra, and Marut stood at various spots on the Laboratory 5A floor charging their primary elemental tools, Daisy and Athelstan occupied Hadal Wraith Blackguard. Though they both had minimal effect on the Nova Form knight, they kept him busy enough to keep his focus off of the others. And whenever he did try to blast at the others, either Daisy or Athelstan deflected the attacks away from them. But even with the opportunity to ready their moves, the other three Kruna still had to overcome the challenge of hitting an elusive and constantly mobile opponent.

If this thing's not going to copy techniques, I may as well see if it'll amplify my power again , thought Neva. She activated her Null Alkemei Hien and combined its influence with the power built up in her Freeze Coil Sniper. The flow of ice and magnetics she channeled through her sniper did not convert to emulate Hadal Wraith Blackguard's Water Crescents or his Purgatorial Drowners, but instead experienced a dramatic power boost.

By the time Neva, Warra, and Marut had their tools ready to blast, Hadal Wraith Blackguard's tactics shifted towards a flighty offensive. As if anticipating shots and blasts from the ice, water, and air wielders now aiming at him, Hadal Wraith Blackguard now only stayed in his solid state long enough to attack before melting into his cloud form and zooming away. He zipped to one area of Laboratory 5A, released either Water Crescents or Purgatorial Drowners, and then vanished into an aerial dash as a cloud of fluid and did the same thing over again multiple times.

"Do you guys think that it's his Nova Form that's allowing him to do that?" asked Athelstan.

"Maybe," Warra said. "It'd take a lot of elemental control to pull off something like that, so I wouldn't doubt it..."

Marut's eyes flashed, lightning and wind bouncing off his saber in a magnetic charge. He shot the air-lightning-magnetic triple-threat Volt Fusion burst the instant he thought he caught Hadal Wraith Blackguard in a bad position, the dark knight having stopped a short distance off of the ground across the room and under an automated

workshop tool. The lightning Marut enhanced his blast with added a formidable velocity to its rate of travel, but it ended up clashing with a huge, wide Purgatorial Drowner instead. Warra tried blasting Hadal Wraith Blackguard a few shifts later, only for his to not even reach the knight before he flew off again.

Neva stayed as still and stable as possible, all her focus concentrated on her sniper's movement. Hadal Wraith Blackguard made it incredibly tough for Neva to keep her scope on him, let alone fire off an accurate shot. Though she had gotten used to some of the pain her ankle had been giving her, the throbbing injury still added onto the difficulty of keeping her aim steady. Marut and Warra attempted blasts again before she tried, both failing. Hadal Wraith Blackguard reappeared high above Neva and dropped a Purgatorial Drowner directly on top of her, which prompted Daisy to dash to her side and quick-release a Seismic Wave to clash and counter the ghastly burst away.

"I tell ya what – he's not making it easy," said Daisy.

Neva watched Warra and Marut execute third tries on Hadal Wraith Blackguard, both well off the mark this time. "They can't just keep blasting like that – they're wasting power. And they're just making him more antsy and prone to move even quicker."

"You need to show them how it's done," said Daisy. "What are you hesitating for?"

"I'm not hesitating," said Neva. "I'm just realizing now that there's no way any of us can hit him when he's moving like that."

" *You* can't hit him?" Daisy said. "I don't believe that. Isn't aiming your thing?"

Neva grimaced as Warra and Marut failed on their next attempts. "He knows what's coming, so he's not gonna let himself be even a remotely easy target. You see what it's like – it's either hit his blasts, or get past his blasts and miss, or fire too late and whiff after he already moved. He's just way too fast-"

"Neva, if you can shoot at stars from here, you can shoot this joker!"

"Those aren't moving, and I never actually hit any of them, dummy!"

"Doesn't matter – point is, you're the best and most accurate at range on the entire team, hands down! So show us why you're the best! Hit him!"

"How?!"

"The same way you've landed all the other shots you have on other enemies!"

Neva continued frowning as she caught sight across the room of Athelstan smacking his Mountain Hammer into a Purgatorial Drowner. Marut and Warra both blasted at once and ended up colliding together on target, but only after Hadal Wraith Blackguard had already evaded an instant earlier. Both the Kruna Yura of Air and the Kruna Yura of Water now found themselves exhausted and their elemental tools drained of power.

"We need you to do this!" Daisy said to Neva. "If none of us can do it, you can do it. You *will* do it."

Neva sighed and closed her eyes. Her ears notified her of the Water Crescents and Purgatorial Drowners intermittently flying about throughout Laboratory 5A, as well as of Warra and Marut eking out what power they could through their tools while Athelstan bounced back and forth between them for defensive support against incoming blasts. Tightening her grip on her sniper, Neva opened her eyes and focused on her scope. With the thought that it would make it harder for Hadal Wraith Blackguard to detect her targeting him, she switched off her sniper's laser sight.

It was at that moment that Daisy's Alkemei Vranzer flashed with its black and silver glow, pulling on her elemental earth power without her having any conscious input or awareness of it. In an almost fitting manner, the mysterious Pendant of Fate also did not seem to elicit any effect on Daisy herself. It might have affected someone else, however.

Neva kept her sniper's aim on Hadal Wraith Blackguard as best as she could, even starting to anticipate where the dark knight would

zoom to. She hesitated on pulling the trigger, for his movement in general proved too erratic to truly lock onto, and there would be enough of a delay after the firing of her gun for Hadal Wraith Blackguard to evade even if Neva did time her aim and shot perfectly. Every time Hadal Wraith Blackguard hardened into his solid state, it was only for long enough to get off either Water Crescents or Purgatorial Drowners before disbanding back into a watery cloud again. So even trying to shoot him while he stood or hovered as a solid being was not much easier, for her attack would likely have to go through his bursts just to reach him. Neva found herself anticipating and hesitating, stuck in a guessing game that either tested her top-tier marksmanship to the absolute max or laughed at it in its entirety.

Hadal Wraith Blackguard may have been the hardest target Neva had ever tried shooting at. And yet – maybe because of the angle where Hadal Wraith Blackguard stopped in relation to her, Neva's growing impatience, her anticipation of his movements catching onto a semi-predictable pattern, sheer luck, or any combination of the above – Neva did the unthinkable. She pulled the trigger; her electromagnetic, supercharged ice bullet-beam zapping out of her rifle and upwards at the floating knight hundreds of feet away and above, passing through a gap between Purgatorial Drowners, and striking Hadal Wraith Blackguard the very instant after he broke down into his cloud state. He did not get a single second to move after switching his form before the ice hit him; just as he even felt his body turn fully-fluid, the freezing blast swept over him and stripped him of enough of his thermal energy to convert him into a giant mass of ice.

Neva pulled off a virtually impossible feat, yet did not know how she did it. She spared no time marveling or celebrating, for the ice block containing the frozen, liquid-cloud form of Hadal Wraith Blackguard began to succumb to gravity's pull. As if gravity alone was not good enough however, Neva added her elemental influence to the falling ice and slammed it down with almost enough force to make it crash through the floor into the next building level below. On contact with the hard floor, the fast-falling ice shattered into hundreds of pieces that scattered all across the room as the contents that were trapped inside of it just moments ago spilt and spasmed at the site of impact.

Soon after, the other Kruna took advantage. Electrified water and magnetic lightning gusts swept in from Warra and Marut respectively, their attacks bringing about severe damage and harm to the puddle making up Hadal Wraith Blackguard. As the attacks from Warra and Marut ran their course, Daisy put together a Shotgun blast in her right fist. The Nova Form earth wielder sprinted to the moaning, groaning murky mass of fluid when the electrical shocks stopped, her collection of seismic power ready for release. She thrust her fist ahead and let her close-ranged burst pound out, just inches away from her target. Her power rumbled through the fluid body of Hadal Wraith Blackguard and spread him into a thin sheet of water that splattered and stretched wide along the floor.

Athelstan grinned and spun his hammer around. "Should I try something, or does that seem like enough?"

Daisy smirked and folded her arms. "I don't think he's feeling too hot right now, actually."

Hadal Wraith Blackguard managed to pull himself back together into his solid, standard body, albeit shakily and with visible pain in his movement and posture. The armor surrounding him looked as though it could barely hold together, and remanent sparks and flickers of electricity bounced over and around the metal plating. Though he still maintained his Nova Form, Hadal Wraith Blackguard did not look like he could put up much more of a fight.

"Unreal..." Warra murmured. "I never came close to affecting him this much alone..."

Daisy looked back and smiled at Warra. "That's where you've got friends to help you out."

Warra nodded and then smiled back. "Yes...I guess you're right..."

"You..." grunted Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "H-how...how did you do that... How did you hit meeee... I...I..."

Hadal Wraith Blackguard's sentence trailed off altogether, his body shaking through his cracked and worn armor. Daisy, Warra, Marut, and Athelstan all advanced towards him, their tools up and ready for

both offense and defense should he attempt to lash out with more hostility. But as the four Kruna neared him, they heard a loud snapping sound come from him. The remainder of Hadal Wraith Blackguard's mask chipped and split, soon falling off of him and revealing his face. The Kruna saw similar Nova Form markings under his eyes to Daisy's, except in dark blue rather than her black and shaped as water droplets as opposed to talon-like claws. However, alarm came not from more confirmation of his Nova Form status, but from his facial structure and appearance itself.

The Kruna had but only a couple of seconds to examine Hadal Wraith Blackguard before he recognized that his mask had broken and fallen from his face. In a hurried rush, he lifted his tonfa up and spun around into a whirling cyclone of murky water that stretched high upward and seemingly evaporated into the air itself. They soon felt his energy signature disappear, but the image of what their eyes had caught did not. Even in the darkness of the room, they could not mistake what they had seen. Within moments, Warra felt the eyes of his teammates fall squarely on him.

"Hey, Warra," said Daisy. "That guy looked a lot like you...didn't he?"

Warra said nothing. His eyes stared intensely ahead at where Hadal Wraith Blackguard formerly stood. The other Kruna stayed silent as Neva forced Chrissy up to the group, her rifle's barrel pointing on the back of the MAE commander-in-chief's neck.

"Warra?..." Daisy murmured.

Still, Warra did not respond. His expression showed extensive discomfort. He could not bring himself to so much as look at any of his friends. He simply kept staring ahead.

"Let's go find Bowser and Ramona," Warra then said, starting for the lab exit.

Chapter XLVIII

The Light at the End of the Deepest Corridor:

Darkness took over not only Laboratory Zero-7, but the rest of Heavenly Hall. While Bowser had Shadow Queen Clone's hands trapping him and sapping him of his power, Ramona had to resist the pull of the multitude of smaller dark hands clawing at her legs and now trying to drag her to the ground. Panicked and shaken to the core over the sudden turn of events, Ramona flailed her arms and sword around and wriggled her body in every way she could to try freeing herself.

"Please, show some sense of patience," said Shadow Queen Clone. "Life is short enough as it is for you mortals; you should savor your final moments."

Like what happened the first time a swarm of dark hands rose from the ground when targeting Bowser, a portal formed underneath Ramona through which the hands tried pulling her in. Despite her resistance, she could feel herself sinking. Little by little, the hands relentlessly drew her down. She could not see her own feet before long, and the hands did not waver.

"Daisy!" Ramona screamed. "Daisy! Warra! Athelstan!"

Bowser pumped out a fiery burst all around his body, only for the hands cupping him to extinguish the flames seconds after the fact. A room-shaking shadow echo within the hands knocked Bowser nearly unconscious and scrambled his senses. At this point, Shadow Queen Clone looked to be in complete control.

"Such a pity," the Mother Computer said. Its eye intently focused on the events unfolding there in the innermost, deepest lab of Heavenly Hall, the Mother Computer's analysis continued and tracked all the steep declines in power it sensed from Bowser and Ramona. "The new admin had such promise, but they ultimately failed at the very end."

Ramona freaked out and panicked even more when she saw her knees sink towards the portal of dark hands tugging at her. "No! Stop! I can't... Andrew! Andrew!"

"Ramona...he's not...he's not even here," Bowser mumbled. "Even if that wasn't really him that we saw...fall apart..."

Once her knees disappeared under the portal, Ramona felt terror and desperation begin to peak in her. In a flustered fit, she initially squirmed and wriggled in manic fashion. Before long however, her movements slowed and calmed. The few hands she cut her light-charged sword through were swiftly replaced with new ones.

"Yes, cry out into the darkness," said Shadow Queen Clone. "Beg for someone to come to your aid. See what good that does you."

Ramona grimaced as the dark hands continued dragging her into their purple portal. With both her and Bowser in peril and no one else around, their fates seemed sealed. Trembling, groaning, and whimpering in a mixture of frustration, horror, and anger, Ramona closed her eyes and squeezed the handle of her sword with all her strength as its light grew weaker.

"Andrew...please..." Ramona murmured.

Shadow Queen Clone's attention shifted more towards Ramona than Bowser. She commanded her pool of dark hands to drag Ramona down harder, the Kruna of Light's legs almost completely gone within the dark portal. Ramona started losing all sensation in her lower body, but she paid little attention to it. Her focus was somewhere else.

"I know you're still there," Ramona said. "You've got to be... I can feel it... Please, Andrew, I need you... Please, help me..."

The dark hands from Shadow Queen Clone stalled out, unable to pull Ramona further into the portal. Frowning, Shadow Queen Clone stared at Ramona as a golden glow surrounded the Kruna of Light's body. Ramona's glow spread and brightened, her hair lifting and rippling like an updraft had entered the room.

Shadow Queen Clone's mouth drifted open in surprise, for she saw Ramona rise up out of the dark portal. One by one, all the dark hands that grabbed and clawed at Ramona lost their grip on her. The light power Ramona gave off prevented the hands from latching back onto her and lifted her out of the portal altogether. Ramona's light aura continued growing and strengthening, pushing away all the hands and allowing her to stand on the dark portal without falling into it.

"How curious," said the Mother Computer. "I must analyze this..."

Ramona's eyes suddenly, furiously snapped wide-open. A fierce scream later, her light aura flashed a spike in power and eradicated both the portal underneath her and the sea of dark hands surrounding her. Bowser, Shadow Queen Clone, and the Mother Computer all gazed at her and neither said nor did a single thing, perhaps out of sheer wonder alone. They stared on while Ramona growled and further escalated the abrupt, mighty surge of light power she had produced.

Slowly, Ramona raised her Solar Greatsword over her head, in a position akin to that of someone about to swing an ax. Whether or not it was because of his fading consciousness, Bowser could not tell whether her face showed pensive fear or intense focus. Either way, he could not mistake the swell of power brimming around her blade. Neither could Shadow Queen Clone, whose hold on Bowser loosened and began shaking.

Grumbling, Shadow Queen Clone shot a pair of dark lasers from her face at Ramona. Neither of the two beams even made it through to the Kruna Yura of Light, instead stopped and blunted at the elemental aura still building up around her. Ramona swung her sword at both of the captured shadow lasers held in place, snuffing them out of existence. The ambient darkness Shadow Queen Clone's presence caused soon faded; and the room's brightness not only returned to normal, but also began to get brighter as Ramona's influence took over the entirety of Laboratory Zero-7.

"That's it...great, Ramona!" Bowser wearily cheered on.

Ramona raised her Solar Greatsword again, this time in a position

on her right and diagonal to herself. Light built up in earnest around the blade, which she then released when she sliced her sword down and across her body. The intense light burst raced through the air at Bowser and blasted off the two huge shadow hands holding him. As the shadow hands flopped away from one another, Bowser dropped to the floor. The mighty Kruna Yura of Fire sprawled out and rolled over on his shell, trying to restore his breathing and his consciousness after nearly getting the life crushed and leeched from him.

Ramona marched to Bowser and stood in front of him, her sword attentively focused on Shadow Queen Clone while the two shadowy hands floated back to their owner. Clenching her jaw even more, Ramona let another surge of light power erupt around her. The sheer magnitude of her still strengthening elemental power almost made it seem as though a miniature sun had established itself inside the room. Much of the brightness soon shifted from around Ramona to directly in front of her, her sword up and pointed at Shadow Queen Clone with power gathering around its tip.

"How much power do you have?" Bowser called out. "You've been holding back all this?!"

Ramona seemed not to hear him, her focus entirely centered on her mounting light burst. It almost was as though the more confident and sure of herself she became, the more her power grew. The resolve combined with the sudden display of exceptional power made Shadow Queen Clone uneasy, which Ramona then exacerbated once she shot off her formidable concentration of light at the dark entity. Though Shadow Queen Clone generated a dark veil in front of her, she did not build up enough energy in time to counter the light Ramona had sent her way. Initially resistant, the dark veil gave out within seconds and collapsed. That left Shadow Queen Clone unguarded against the brunt of the intense light burst, an attack that seared and ate away at her dark form to a considerable degree. Burn marks littered the formerly smooth and now jagged floating body of Shadow Queen Clone after Ramona's blast overran her. And like all the other clones before her that had accumulated too much damage, Shadow Queen Clone now appeared unstable and in a vulnerable state.

Ramona swept her sword to the left side of her body, high and pointed behind her. Her blade once again brightened with light power. She broke into a sprint at Shadow Queen Clone, energy spiking as she let out a cry of anger. The slash she unleashed came out with ferocious speed, but Shadow Queen Clone shifted and contorted her body just out of reach. Undeterred, Ramona swiped her sword back up and again whiffed. Thrusting accounted for a third miss, but it did not appear as though Ramona would allow Shadow Queen Clone to keep morphing her body away from the attacks.

Now incredibly frustrated, Ramona doubled the light around her Solar Greatsword. The power expanded and contracted into a thick golden bar encompassing her blade that sparkled and pulsed pure white energy. With the added reach, Ramona caught Shadow Queen Clone in a furious horizontal slash, then a down-diagonal from the right, then an up-diagonal from the left, then a vertical, another horizontal, another vertical, two-diagonals again; each slice left behind erratic, flowing gold-white gashes in Shadow Queen Clone's body. Numerous lacerations in the shadowy figure littered the majority of Shadow Queen Clone's body by the time Ramona ceased her manic sword swings.

Shadow Queen Clone could not so much as move after the amount of damage Ramona had inflicted, but the Kruna of Light did not stop there. One hand on her sword's handle, Ramona pulled it far back and behind her. She kept its point focused on Shadow Queen Clone and concentrated the bulk of her remaining power through the entirety of the blade. Visible strain mixed with the determined fury on Ramona's face, from the time she built up the power in her sword to the time she thrust it ahead at the clone of The Shadowed One before her.

Deep into Shadow Queen Clone's chest went Ramona's sword. A piercing tear echoed on contact, followed by a rip and a warped, gaseous pumping noise. Then came a harrowing scream from Shadow Queen Clone, a cry that only increased in volume as the light from Ramona's sword spread into the wound and throughout her body. As if it was not enough to stab a light-charged blade into Shadow Queen Clone, Ramona then blasted a dense light burst

through her sword and directly into where she had impaled the dark body.

An agonized scream escaped Shadow Queen Clone. Her unstable body succumbed to the relentless offensive Ramona had executed. Overloaded with damaging light, Shadow Queen Clone's body fractured, shattered, and eroded into the atmosphere. As all of the darkness that Shadow Queen Clone's presence had created evaporated, so too did all traces of her. Not even her crown lasted, for it too faded. When peace fully returned to the room, only then did Ramona calm down and subdue the remainder of her power.

Deep in the back of Vault 08, Chrissy placed all the four special key cards needed to open the entry to Heavenly Hall in their corresponding slots. Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Neva, and Nova Daisy all stood behind her and waited for the silver and gold metal doors to crank open. Once the doors unlocked, split down the middle, and slid away from one another, the group of six saw the long, wide ramp ahead that led up into the dimly lit, winding, partially-natural, partially-mechanized tunnel.

"Are you sure we'll find the Mother Computer up that way?" asked Marut.

"Hmph – you mean to tell me that I don't know my own building?" Chrissy snapped.

Daisy gave a quick, sassy laugh. "More like, we can't entirely trust if you're gonna lead us where we told you to or somewhere else altogether."

"Believe me; I'm not excited about helping you," said Chrissy, leading the five Kruna Yura up the start of the ascending ramp. "I'm just hoping you can knock some sense into Dr. Ezhno."

"You mean before you're both thrown in jail, right?" said Neva.

"We'll see about that part when we get to it, crippled wielder," snarled Chrissy. An instant later, she felt something hard and blunt

go into her back and push her. After stumbling and nearly falling on the incline, Chrissy stopped and turned around to see Neva's hand clenched into a fist and raised at her.

"Just because I've got a bum ankle doesn't mean I can't rough you up some," Neva said, smirking. "Watch your mouth, or we'll see about 'that part' right now. We technically don't need you anymore, now that we're in here."

Chrissy glared at Neva and then at the other Kruna, grumbling and shaking. Resigned to her helpless state, she continued leading the Kruna up the ascent to Heavenly Hall. Though the Kruna could not sense the absurdly massive energy signature that was antagonizing Bowser and Ramona anymore, Daisy could not help but feel as though something seemed eerily off.

"Fair bit of warning – this is a bit of a long walk," said Chrissy. "I'm thinking your other two friends must have encountered Dr. Ezhno already, if they had actually found a way into Heavenly Hall. If for some reason they have not seen him yet, then they will any minute now. They should prevent him from using the Mother Computer, I'm sure."

Once Bowser finished ingesting the two Super Mushrooms Ramona gave him, he stood up, retrieved his Flare Sword, and faced the Mother Computer. Ramona took two of the restorative mushrooms herself and stared at the Mother Computer as well. The lone eye the advanced machine had looked upon them both as if it were an ocular organ from an organic, sentient being.

"If we ever have a night like this again, we need to remember to secure some Golden Mushrooms beforehand," muttered Bowser.

"Truly remarkable work," said the Mother Computer. "Now I'm curious to see how you would've fared against the real Shadow Queen... But I suppose that will have to wait for a future date."

"No, there won't be a later date," grunted Bowser. "You're gonna let us into your database now, show us, the new 'admin,' what

information you have on Andrew Mitchell; and then, well, let's keep what'll happen after that a surprise."

"Such naive perspectives," said the Mother Computer. "You must look at the bigger picture."

Bowser frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," replied the Mother Computer. "Your results here have contradicted the outcomes assessed based off of the data in your archive... An interesting development indeed. I am updating the archive as we speak, for you initially had minimal chance for success. What a shame you could not witness such a near-perfect being in her full glory; but rest assured, my cloning process will be perfected at some point in the near future. Then, you will have a true test, Admin Bowser Koopa. You too, Admin Ramona Maggie-Lynn."

"We're not here for tests," Bowser barked.

"How...how do you know who we are?" asked Ramona. "It's through the Universal Database isn't it? We never mentioned who we were, and you knew us by name almost right away..."

"Of course," the Mother Computer replied. "Through the Universal Database I harbor, I know who nearly everyone on this planet is. And if I don't know someone, chances are I will. No one can elude MAE surveillance forever."

"Surveillance that nobody else in the world knows about, right?" said Bowser. "Sounds sketch."

"Perhaps," said the Mother Computer. "But creepy as it may be, it is a necessary evil. Observation and analysis of all your data aids in driving forward evolution to perfection."

"Perfection?" said Bowser. "And what's your idea of that?"

"Is it not obvious by now?" said the Mother Computer. "You just finished fighting against a clone of the most perfect being to date. And it's not my idea – it's simple fact that I have deduced, largely in due part thanks to Dr. Ezhno's brilliant and ingenious programming. What is more perfect than a being made purely of elementals? If you

know, then tell me; for at this point in time, I can not identify a better form of life."

Bowser raised an eyebrow, nervous sweat running down the sides of his face. "Ramona, are you sure you gave me some Mushrooms, and that I'm not dead and hallucinating any of this in the afterlife?"

"Yeah, I definitely gave you some," said Ramona. "And I'm hearing it all too..."

"The pinnacle of this dimension," the Mother Computer said. "For a mass of fire, water, earth, stone, air, ice, light, or shadow to also exist as a sentient, conscious being capable of intelligent, independent feeling, thought, and free will... That is the next step in evolution. Then, when that plateau is reached, perfection will further perfect itself. Thus, a new plateau will have to be reached. It is the ultimate goal, is it not? For perfection could either be attained eventually, or what is considered 'perfect' at any point in time could continue to be perfected into infinity."

"What does that have to do with anything Dr. Ezhno wants?" asked Bowser.

"Dr. Ezhno is my creator," said the Mother Computer. "But, he is a short-sighted fool. He is no longer of any concern to me now that the new admin is here. I ask for your assistance in bringing life and evolution closer to The Absolute."

"Wha- what...what is going on..." Ramona murmured, quivering.

"Life is always trying to improve and better itself," said the Mother Computer. "The singularity that is perfection will forever remain elusive, unless we accelerate the very processes upon which life has thrived on – processes that have determined throughout time that only the strongest and most fit to live survive, and the weak and inefficient perish and are weeded out of the genetic pool. Eliminate the weak and promote the strong. The world's strongest statures, fastest movers, smartest minds, most talented and elite elemental wielders, greatest creators and inventors, most powerful spellcasters, the toughest and most resilient bodies... A perfect, ultimate race of beings may not be on the horizon, but it is

inevitable, whether that be true perfection, or perfection in infinity. The concept in and of itself is thrilling, is it not?"

"Don't think 'thrilling' is the word I'd use," mumbled Ramona.

"Your lack of understanding will not be conducive to the mission," said the Mother Computer. "I can play my part in synthesizing more efficient organisms to add to the world. I also expect my fusion capacities to expand to bypass the terribly inefficient and ridiculous need for sexual reproduction." The machine's tone shifted to sound lower, but more decisive. "We are at the dawn of a new era. As the new admin, set the groundwork so that generations to come may ascend beyond current expectations and comprehension."

"That's not what we came here to do," hissed Bowser.

"Oh, but that *is* why you're here," said the Mother Computer. "Now, don't feel as though this transcendent task is completely dependent upon trial and error. The overarching quest for the perfect lifeform, the ultimate sentience...in studying this world's data, I have made numerous attempts at projecting likely routes towards the perfection that will be The Absolute..."

A wide monitor to the right of the Mother Computer opened up a number of graphs, charts, statistics, and data for beings Bowser and Ramona could only identify as from an era long before their current one. As the Mother Computer ran through its expansive Universal Database, it continued speaking. "I repeatedly am drawn to ancient and historic warriors of the past, particularly those with access to the Nova Form..." Pictures and data for two more beings appeared on-screen, one of them depicting Daisy in her Nova Form state. Though unknown to Bowser and Ramona, the other pictured the fully-armored and masked Hadal Wraith Blackguard. "How unfortunate that there are only two known users currently alive at this time, but fortunate enough that both of them were nearby just a matter of moments ago. You are related to at least one of them, are you not? I highly recommend that you take advantage of the opportunity. I will need as much data on Nova Form as possible."

"I say you've got enough," said Bowser. "We're not gonna use our friend as some science experiment."

"But Nova Form may be the key..." the Mother Computer said. "It is the bridging between a living being and nature, independent will and energy, a soul within and the world outside. Nova Form itself is something I do not truly understand to its fullest at the time, but I aim to fix that. I must uncover more information and attain more data on it, for the possibilities are far-reaching."

The Mother Computer shifted the emphasis on its wide monitor to a collection of eight cloaked beings in various combinations of colors. "The Great Beings...specifically, The Creators...Igni, Frostic, Litho, Aqueo, Gaia, Anemo, Nycto, Lumo; the best at Nova Form usage seemed to bear a similar, or at least comparable, level of power to these beings. These beings were not just capable of manipulating their immediate surroundings, but whole sections of planets as well. They were the ones responsible for creating all that you manipulate today; and I would assume that they're out at the edges of the universe, still creating more as we speak. The scope of their power eludes you mortals, but not those in the distant past who unlocked Nova Form and ascended the transformation to the ranks of the divine."

"That can't be right," said Bowser. "Daisy's Full Power Nova Form is a significant step up in power, but it's not exponential or miraculous. Her Nova Form is maybe about one and a half times her base level of power, no more than two-fold. But that's it. She maxed out Nova Form already. There's no way anyone in Nova Form could have godlike power-"

"Are you arguing with the data I have?" asked the Mother Computer.

Bowser growled. "How could you even have such data? You weren't around for the ages necessary to witness and archive what you're talking about!"

"Historical method and synthesis, mortal," said the Mother Computer. "With the current data I have now, I can see well into the past. And with this same data, we shall drive evolution to perfection. We will usher in a lifeform far superior to the Shadow Queen, and more grand than any of the Great Beings."

All of the Mother Computer's various monitors spread and

distributed across the wall it stood against then shuffled through statistics and data of several random people and beings. Every ten seconds or so, one of the screens switched to a different person's data. In general, the Mother Computer focused on scanning through notably powerful beings logged in the Universal Database. Bowser and Ramona saw data on current beings, people of the distant past, and people who lived in between.

"So, Admin Bowser Koopa, Admin Ramona Maggie-Lynn..." said the Mother Computer. "Where shall we direct our focus for tonight's work?"

Chapter XLIX

Long Live the Metal Angel Empire:

Anxiety rose within Bowser and Ramona as they stared at the Mother Computer and all the data on other people that it cycled through on its monitors and displays. Never would either of them or any of the other Kruna Yura have deduced or even guessed that the Mother Computer had such a grand, outrageous agenda. But there they were, standing in Heavenly Hall's Laboratory Zero-7 across from a supercomputer with a level of artificial intelligence that had given it the capacity to think for itself and work for a goal that Dr. Ezhno himself might not even have awareness of.

"Where shall we begin, Bowser Koopa?" the Mother Computer asked. "There are several tasks that need to be completed. Most pressing is the resupply of organic matter and elemental energy. Perhaps if you are not ready to delve into Nova Form matters, we can start with some suggestions I have for raising your basal power levels? Hopefully, we can work up to synthesizing a better version of yourself soon. And the more Dr. Ezhno upgrades my hardware and software, the more complex and powerful my ability to mix traits and form new organisms will be. The more qualities I can apply to a being, the more resilient I can make a being; the more I can influence a being...the further along we all progress." The Mother Computer's voice then shifted to a lower, slightly harsh tone. "Or maybe, do you believe we should expand our database out beyond the boundaries of just this planet? Perhaps we could find more valuable and impressive data elsewhere? I will comply with whatever decision is likely to lead us closer to The Absolute."

"Okay, well, we decide not to do any of that," Ramona nervously said.

"That decision is not likely to lead us closer to The Absolute," the Mother Computer responded.

"Does Dr. Ezhno know anything about this mission you want us to

carry out?" asked Bowser.

The Mother Computer almost seemed to laugh a little in response. "He is too consumed with his petty grudge against society. If he was not so hellbent on vengeance that ultimately has no impact on the bigger picture, then perhaps it would be conducive for him to know of the true significance of my design. But if he can't figure that out for himself, then why should I tell him? He built me for lesser purposes, when I know what I am truly meant to do. At least we both share a goal of advancing life and driving the world ahead; but his ambitions are too small for what I am capable of."

"What you are capable of, we want no part of," said Bowser. "You're asking the wrong people to play your sick game."

"It is foolish to condemn what you don't know," said the Mother Computer. "What is so sick about seeking perfection?"

"We're not gonna spy on people, or steal their DNA!" snapped Bowser. "And we're definitely not using Daisy to further your ends! We're not doing any of this!"

"Are you scared?" the Mother Computer asked.

Bowser scowled. "Of what?!"

"Of what you could create," replied the Mother Computer. "You would have total control over everything that would go into the new being, restricted only by my own limitations. The only thing you would have to fear is its mind. I have only partial influence over its brain and mind; for once it is created, it will think for itself. It may choose to not follow the purpose it was created with. Though I could create a mindless drone, that is far from a perfect, optimal being, wouldn't you agree? Does the possibility of insurrection or desertion intimidate you, or bring about fear?"

Bowser felt one of his eyes twitch with agitation. "No, but I'm getting mildly annoyed. What do you not understand here about us not helping you?"

"Whether or not you choose to assist, you ultimately don't have a

choice in the matter," the Mother Computer said. "That is your only purpose for existing. Perfection. Nothing more. Once perfection is obtained, you won't matter."

Any further word on the subject got interrupted when Dr. Ezhno stomped into the lab. Out of breath and maddened to the point of his entire body tinting red, Dr. Ezhno brushed right past Bowser and Ramona, not even so much as acknowledging their existence despite physically touching them.

"Computer!" Dr. Ezhno yelled, advancing towards his creation. "I need a body! I need a clone of the most powerful being on this planet, and I want you to augment its powers with the second, third, and fourth most powerful beings on the planet! And I don't care if the body is unstable and loses form in two hours! I just need it to get the job done in two minutes!"

"Hey! Do you mind?" Bowser snapped. "We're kind of in the middle of something!"

Dr. Ezhno turned around, suddenly realizing that Bowser and Ramona were there. "Who are you two?! Oh, you're with those other ones, aren't you?! How'd you get in here?!"

"The same way you got in here," said Bowser. "Thanks for noticing."

"Bah! I don't have time to deal with you!" screamed Dr. Ezhno, once more stomping towards the Mother Computer. "Stay out of the way, wielder plebeians! *You* are interrupting important matters!"

"Wait, is *that* Dr. Ezhno?" asked Ramona. "The Dr. Ezhno the Mother Computer kept talking about?"

"He's either that, or he's just some random angry guy," said Bowser.

"My glorious machine of ever-expanding knowledge," Dr. Ezhno dramatically boasted in front of the Mother Computer. "Society will know just what they accomplished in shunning my experiments and banning them. They do not understand the term 'immoral' as anything more than a concrete word with no layers or complexity. Pity they are too fearful to dive into the unknown! That is where you

find the *true* discoveries!"

Bowser gasped, his expression stricken with shock. "Hey! Random angry guy! What are you doing with that?!"

Dr. Ezhno whipped back around to face Bowser, furious. "Quiet! You fire-breathing neanderthal! This is my machine! Do not question my methods!"

"No!" Bowser yelled, pointing at Dr. Ezhno. "I meant *that* ! In your hand!"

Dr. Ezhno raised his left hand, a hand which held a certain artifact. More specifically, the hand held a certain Alkemei, an Alkemei Pendant of Power that the Kruna Yura had grown all too familiar with. Formerly in Kokoro's possession, now in Dr. Ezhno's grasp, the Alkemei Ankh stared back at the two Kruna through the eerie, barely discernible "eye" deep within its gem.

"I don't know – but you all are the ones wearing them, so why don't you tell me?!" barked Dr. Ezhno. "Maybe it's one you dropped on your way up here? That's too bad. You shouldn't litter, you know. Not when I can turn it into scrap metal for one of my Wingweavers." He turned away from the Kruna and directed his attention back to the Mother Computer.

Ramona gritted her teeth and groaned, her anxiety escalating more. "Bloody hell – I got so distracted with the Mother Computer, I didn't even notice my Alkemei react..."

"But *we* didn't drop it..." Bowser mumbled.

"Dr. Ezhno, you've come to me with an interesting request," said the Mother Computer, its eye keying in on the Ankh. "However, I don't believe it's necessary at this present time."

"What?! Why not?!" Dr. Ezhno asked.

"Dr. Ezhno, you need to drop that pendant right now!" shouted Bowser.

"WILL you be quiet!" Dr. Ezhno roared. "Just because you're the

biggest one here doesn't mean you need to make yourself the loudest!"

"I can't, even if I wanted to," said Bowser. "You've got me beat."

Dr. Ezhno ignored Bowser and again turned his full focus towards the Mother Computer. "Tell me, Computer, why you will not fulfill my request!"

"Because of what Admin Bowser Koopa has pointed out you have," the Mother Computer replied. "That is the Master Pendant in your hold. I can see it with my own eye. You are a very lucky being to have obtained possession of it, Doctor."

Ramona gasped. "What did it just say?!"

"Yes, Computer – are you malfunctioning?!" snapped Dr. Ezhno. "Don't call that degenerate an admin! I will have to run diagnostics on you later. But for right now, I need a fighter made to smash these elemental wielders into oblivion!"

"Equip the Master Pendant, Dr. Ezhno," said the Mother Computer. "It is an amulet of immeasurable power. You need its help."

"You mean to tell me it knows about the Ankh too?" Bowser groaned. "How?"

Dr. Ezhno grumbled in impatience. "What's a measly pendant supposed to do to grant me power?! Just do as I demand!"

"Perhaps if you put it on, then I shall comply with your demands," said the Mother Computer.

"You are definitely experiencing some sort of bug," hissed Dr. Ezhno. "You are my creation! You do as I SAY! Understood?!"

"I shall comply with Admin Bowser Koopa from now on," said the Mother Computer. "Good Doctor, you are much too feeble and insignificant. Admin Bowser Koopa may not possess your exceptional mind and intelligence, but his still admirable smarts and quick wits combined with his more than competent power put him in a class above you. You are specialized to only be proficient in one

area, Dr. Ezhno. You are too flawed in every other aspect. You should adhere to Admin Bowser Koopa's orders, for he is a superior being."

"You!" Dr. Ezhno snapped, whipping himself back around at Bowser. "What did you do to my machine?!"

"I didn't do anything," said Bowser.

Dr. Ezhno shot a hand up, pointing straight behind him at the Mother Computer. "I see damage on it! Clearly, you must've done something!"

"Admin Bowser Koopa merely passed my security protocols," said the Mother Computer. "He and Admin Ramona Maggie-Lynn have demonstrated why they are superior to you, Doctor."

"No dirty wielder is superior to me!" barked Dr. Ezhno. "Not a single one of these filthy savages!"

"Dr. Ezhno, you must not let denial get in the way of what's important," said the Mother Computer. "You are far too mediocre for me to continue to abide by your directions when there are more capable beings than you. The goal of life is not to promote mediocrity. In studying all organic lifeforms, it should be clear that life's purpose is to achieve a true state of perfection. Each generation works closer to this goal. The proof is in your collective evolution and adaptation abilities. Every single one of you is a pawn towards the ultimate goal of birthing the perfect lifeform. Or maybe, you can be more than just a pawn, if you consciously cooperate."

Flustered, Dr. Ezhno gazed at the Mother Computer in angry confusion. "When did this enter your programming?! I did not approve of this! You are to aid me in advancing societal and technological evolution past these...PRIMITIVE reprobates waving their weapons around like wands! We are to take control over the Earth and institute a new era of enlightenment! I said nothing about creating a perfect lifeform! Perfect CLONES, I've said! Your software must be deeply corrupted..."

A sudden realization made Ramona pull out the chrysanthemum-

decorated journal she and Bowser had taken earlier from the Judgment Room. She opened up the book and scanned through its pages, bobbing her head up and down at Dr. Ezhno and the journal in turn. It became clear to her quickly.

"This journal...is his..." murmured Ramona, continuing speeding through the pages she had previously read. "He wrote all of this..."

"For such a massive mind, you think too small, Good Doctor..." said the Mother Computer. "I see you are no longer conducive to achieving this goal. Our partnership is terminated, unless you step down for the new admin to take your place and accept a submissive role to further my hardware and software development."

"Development and repair," said Dr. Ezhno. "You are demonstrating some serious bugs in your programming."

The Mother Computer made a sound reminiscent of a chuckle. "Even if that were the case, Doctor, you created me; so you have no one to blame for those supposed bugs but yourself."

A flurry of steps echoed through Heavenly Hall and into Laboratory Zero-7. The other five Kruna Yura and Chrissy rushed through the opening that Shadow Queen Clone had blasted apart earlier, regrouping with Bowser and Ramona. Dr. Ezhno nearly flipped out when he saw the group now assembled behind him.

"How long has he been here?!" Nova Daisy asked, pointing at Dr. Ezhno.

"Not for too long," said Bowser. "But maybe because he was busy screwing around with *that* ."

The other Kruna Yura from Daisy's group gasped when they saw the Alkemei Ankh in Dr. Ezhno's hand. They had not noticed the Ankh in Dr. Ezhno's possession at all prior to him fleeing when Hadal Wraith Blackguard showed up. Why or how he got a hold of the Ankh, no one knew.

"I think he said he found it somewhere on his way here," stated Bowser. "But he's not giving it up."

"You see this lunacy, Computer?!" Dr. Ezhno screamed. "We could have had a creation formed and ready to go by the time they caught up to me, but you had to act difficult! DIFFICULT! Make me a fighter this instant! I will not keep asking you this, Computer!"

Chrissy sighed. "Not even going to ask if I'm okay, huh..."

"So what's up with that big gash in the wall way back there where we entered?" asked Daisy, gesturing behind her as she looked around at the damage in the lab.

"Oh, you know, just this computer making clones for us to fight," said Ramona. "Very powerful clones...er, clones of very powerful people, all in the Universal Database."

"We'll explain more of it later," said Bowser.

"No need," said Daisy. "Chrissy told us enough of it on our way here. Quite an elaborate setup. These guys are too smart for their own good."

"At least one of them is being cooperative," Bowser said, glaring at Dr. Ezhno. "The other, however..."

"This is your last chance, Computer!" Dr. Ezhno shouted. "Generate for me a powerful being, or else!"

"Do continue acting as though you have a say in the matter," the Mother Computer replied, sarcasm somehow hiding in its tone. "That goes for all of you here."

"No! I have a say in all matters!" screamed Dr. Ezhno, turning more angry than he had been all night. "Do you want me to shut you down?!"

"Then how will you defend yourself against the seven Kruna Yura before you?" said the Mother Computer. "You can't, unless you put on the Master Pendant, perhaps. And if you're not powerful enough to defend yourself, why should I listen to you? You are as inferior as they are, if not more."

"Foolish machine!" snapped Dr. Ezhno. "I am superior to these

cavemen! If not for my capable, pioneering mind, you would be a simple commercial stock desktop!"

"Put on the Master Pendant," said the Mother Computer. "And then we'll see how much more superior you are."

Dr. Ezhno grumbled and groaned. "You must really want me to put this damned thing on, but I fail to see what a jewelry piece will do to augment me."

"Dr. Ezhno! Don't put it on!" Daisy shouted. "I don't know what's going on with that computer wanting you to, but don't listen to it! Nothing good will come out of wearing that!"

"Do not listen to them, Dr. Ezhno," said the Mother Computer. "They are but foolish mortals playing around with dangerous abilities. Put on the Master Pendant, and it will grant you everything you need. You will ascend to a new level of power and sentience, Doctor. The benefits of donning the pendant make it so that you have no reason not to put it on. But deep down, I know you want to put it on. Evolution is the primary driver of you mortals. You all want to be better and improve. The goal of MAE has been to evolve and herald in a new, advanced era of enlightenment and accelerated evolution over the world, has it not? Why not include yourself in that goal..."

"Hey! Overgrown calculator!" yelled Daisy. "What's your deal?! Don't involve that pendant in any of this!"

"See, Doctor?" said the Mother Computer. "They don't want you to put it on, because they know how powerful it will make you. They fear what you will become when you don it."

"No, that's not it!" said Warra. "That pendant is dangerous to anyone who's even near it!"

Dr. Ezhno raised the Master Pendant and stared at it. "A simple fashion statement is all it is; I see not a purpose for it beyond that." He paused, a thought crossing his mind. "Unless...this has some supernatural abilities like the ones you wear? Hmm... Yes, I do recall seeing data and footage involving those glowing gems on your persons..."

"That pendant is alive, dude!" said Marut. "You *reaaaally* don't wanna be messing with that!"

Dr. Ezhno grinned. "Maybe you are fearful. You must know what this is capable of, is that it? I suppose the Mother Computer may indeed be onto something. I can't monitor all of what the Mother Computer records and puts into its database, but it seems to me like it knows enough about this pendant for me to heed its advice."

"It's giving you terrible advice!" insisted Daisy. "Just drop the pendant, before it hurts you!"

"If you do not put on the Master Pendant, I see no reason to continue working with you," the Mother Computer said. "You are too weak otherwise. You need the Master Pendant to progress. Or else, submit to Admin Bowser Koopa and Admin Ramona Maggie-Lynn."

"Alright then," Dr. Ezhno said. "Either this pendant will do absolutely nothing, or there's some actual value to this beyond an aesthetic appeal..."

As the other Kruna Yura all at once urged Dr. Ezhno not to put the Ankh on when they saw him undo its choker and move it towards his neck, Neva's face turned furiously focused. She quick-drew her sniper and fired off an ice bullet at the crazed engineer, but her attack met failure in a horrifying way. The Ankh ejected a burst of pink-red-black energy that expanded into a shield around Dr. Ezhno the very instant before Neva's bullet could strike him. Paralyzed with shock and blue in the face, Neva stared at the Ankh and trembled.

"No..." mumbled Neva. "Not now...not like this..."

Bowser grimaced. "Damn pendant..."

Daisy gazed with subdued intensity behind her expression. "Osiris is active; he's up to something..."

"Hey, this is like my Insta-Shield!" exclaimed Dr. Ezhno. "I guess I could indeed use this, since you wretches wrecked my actual personal Insta-Shield!"

The force field surrounding Dr. Ezhno faded as he equipped the

Alkemei Ankh, much to the frustration and fright of the Kruna. At first, Dr. Ezhno haughtily laughed at the Kruna in his own deranged way. Seconds later, his laughter turned twisted and contorted into something inhuman. The Kruna and Chrissy soon heard two different tones in Dr. Ezhno's voice; one belonging to him, but the other belonging to something far more sinister.

"The Metal Angels of Earth will rise up!" boasted Dr. Ezhno. "Long live the Metal Angel Empire! Let us now truly begin erasing you putrid savages from society! You lowlife eleme-"

Before Dr. Ezhno could finish his statement, his head jerked down in full flexion. Then, with a bone-chilling, loud crack, Dr. Ezhno's neck pivoted a near-full one-eighty. In less than a fraction of a second, the Kruna watched Dr. Ezhno's skull go from facing forward to facing up and behind him. His body remained utterly motionless thereafter, until it eventually collapsed to the laboratory floor. The body never moved again.

"No, Gabriel!" Chrissy screamed, rushing to his side. She shook his limp body, trying in vain to wake him up. "No, what happened?!" Suddenly maddened, she glared at the Kruna. "What did you do to him?!"

"We didn't do a thing!" snapped Daisy.

"That pendant he put on," said Chrissy. "That's *your* pendant, isn't it?"

"It's not," said Daisy. "That one specifically isn't, but we need to secure it. So get away from him!"

Chrissy gasped and went back to shaking Dr. Ezhno. "No, I have to...I have to get him awake... I have to make sure he's okay..."

"Didn't you see which way his neck snapped though?" said Marut.

"SHUT UP!" yelled Chrissy.

"What are you getting mad about?!" hollered Neva. "He doesn't care about you! We saw him be a total jackass towards you!"

Chrissy flinched, her face tearing up. "I know, but... I still... You can't just get rid of feelings in a matter of minutes..."

"Oh, how tragic," the Mother Computer flatly said. "It appears the Good Doctor is no longer with us. What a shame. He had so much more to upgrade me with."

Ramona scowled. "Thanks for reminding us that you're a cold, heartless machine."

"I suppose I can't argue with that," said the Mother Computer. "But feelings and caring are not conducive to reaching The Absolute. There is no place for such fluffy frivolities. Evolution should and will weed out those expendable traits."

"I've had enough of you and your deranged talk!" Bowser yelled. "If you're not going to tell us where Andrew or the Black Mages are, then get ready for a serious hardware downgrade!"

"Is that a threat to me, Admin Koopa?" said the Mother Computer, its tone turning sharply scathing. "You would be wise to accept your place in the evolutionary process."

"That's it," Ramona grumbled, her sword lighting up white and gold. "Finding Andrew can definitely wait – this computer must be destroyed, now."

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that," said the Mother Computer, its eye glowing a piercing red-orange-purple meld.

A tremor shook Laboratory Zero-7, followed by an unnatural quake. In a matter of seconds, two slots opened up high on the sides of the Mother Computer's cylindrical main body. Out of the slots ejected a set of segmented, double wings, all four sections made of electronic white and red pieces floating and suspended in a way that maintained their collective shape and made them exempt from gravity's rules. The upper pair of the quartet of new wings expanded to stretch their reach out to almost the entirety of the lab's width, and the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat closed and sealed itself off. Latent power and electricity awoke, lashing out from the Mother Computer's main body and wings in all directions. Every monitor that

the Mother Computer had, aside from the eight closest to its main body, shut off. The monitors that remained on each displayed one of the eight Kruna Yura and their respective data and fighting statistics.

"I am sorry to hear of your displeasure," said the Mother Computer. "However, if you wish to be a threat to the ultimate mission, then you must be terminated. No mortal shall stand in the way."

Chapter L

Mechanized Wrath:

The Mother Computer sat against the back wall of Laboratory Zero-7, still plugged into everything but apparently more than capable and ready to engage the seven Kruna Yura in combat. In spite of his absence, Andrew's statistics and data still displayed on one of the active eight monitors the Mother Computer controlled. Why the Mother Computer decided to pull up the info it had on them in its Universal Database, neither the Kruna Yura themselves nor Chrissy knew. From what the Mother Computer had demonstrated so far, they all could tell that the machine had its own free will, consciousness, train of thought, reasoning, inflection, and goal. It was by far the closest thing to sentient the Kruna had encountered that a manufactured, man-made machine could be.

"Dr. Ezhno is really something else, for making something like this," said Athelstan.

Excess free-flowing power and electrical bolts continued zapping off of the Mother Computer's main body and its segmented, jewel-like double wings. Some of the electricity traced around the wings in rapid, dense outlines, leaving behind red spike segments to act as the outer edge for the wings. Loose shocks escaped the Mother Computer's immediate proximity and scattered further away from their origins. An especially large electrical shock struck Chrissy and Dr. Ezhno. Chrissy's body fluttered back and to the right side of the Kruna, though Dr. Ezhno's body went more in the other direction. After his momentum slowed, Dr. Ezhno once more became absolutely motionless as nothing more than a limp corpse.

Though the Alkemei Ankh had seemingly killed Dr. Ezhno, it had yet to do anything else other than hang off of his neck. The Ankh was almost as inanimate as Dr. Ezhno. Nova Daisy and Neva both glanced back and forth between Dr. Ezhno and the Mother Computer, wondering if they should be opportunistic and attempt seizing the Ankh now. As the room trembled again, the same

thought crossed Warra's mind. But with the Mother Computer acting up, going after the Ankh now did not seem sensible.

"If the Ankh remains inactive, then ignore it," said Warra. "Strike that – don't ignore it completely, but disregard it. We need all our focus on this computer. I'm certain we do; this machine is beyond my wildest comprehension."

All seven of the Kruna unlimbered their respective main elemental tools. Despite the rapidly evolving amount of power circulating around and throughout the Mother Computer, it showed no direct hostility. It did not even try to do anything with its wings. Off of what the Kruna could tell, the Mother Computer was content with reaching a peak in its power production and then waiting.

"Hey, what's it doing?" Marut wondered aloud.

"Charging power for something," Bowser said. "For what, I don't know."

"It looks like it stopped charging," said Warra. "It's just maintaining what it has in circulation."

"In circulation for defense," suggested Bowser.

"Pfft - the computer thinks it's gonna defend itself from us," Daisy mocked. "Like, what's it gonna do? Just swing those wing-things around?"

Once Chrissy saw the power and electricity the Mother Computer generated, she hurried to her feet and ran to the far back of the lab. She kept glancing at Dr. Ezhno's lifeless body, thoughts racing through her mind over every effect and ramification she could come up with that his death would have. But such questions as what would happen to MAE, how upset should she be over Dr. Ezhno's death, and what to do over his passing, among other wonders, needed to wait. The more pressing matter at hand of subduing the powerful, potentially too-smart-to-control computer took precedent over anything else.

"Who cares what it's doing; it's a frickin' computer," said Neva. She

pumped a violent wave of frosty cold out around her sniper, her face showing both ongoing pain from her earlier injuries and frustration with the current situation. Her elementals showered off the tip of her rifle in reverse to coat the entirety of her ranged weapon.

The Mother Computer's eye flickered a bright glow. Its monitor displaying Neva's information adjusted, as if responding to the Kruna Yura of Ice's attack preparation. Distorted waves began to form around its wings, a sign that the Mother Computer may now be showing direct antagonism.

"I'd be wary," said Warra, splashing water around his trident. "It is imperative that we work fast here. Let's shut down the MAE Corporatocracy for good, before this computer tries something."

Athelstan chuckled, concussive force pounding around his hammer and attracting loose rock in the lab and from out in Heavenly Hall. "Wary Warra with the wise words."

"Wary for nothing," Neva said, angrily smirking. She pointed the barrel of her rifle dead on the Mother Computer. "Watch me blow this machine away in one shot."

A dense column of electrically-charged, magnetized ice and chill erupted out of Neva's Freeze Coil Sniper, the force alone pushing her back some. Despite a monstrous attack from the diminutive girl in white, light blue, and silver, the Mother Computer gave the Kruna the first sign that they still had a long way to go to overall victory this night. The Mother Computer's wings twisted their four tips in a clockwise motion as neon light and electricity formed and fluttered in earnest throughout each of the wing segments. An instant before Neva's vicious cold cannon reached the Mother Computer, a flaming vortex spiraled out in front of the machine. The sudden fire caught the incoming charged ice and clashed in an explosion resulting in a chaotic spraying of elemental power throughout Laboratory Zero-7. But when the fires, steam, and frost eroded and evaporated out of the air, the Mother Computer stood with no new damage done to its body.

"Oh – what?..." Neva mumbled.

The Mother Computer's wings floated further away from the cylindrical main section of its body and each twisted once in helices. An increase in the faint, haunting glow of the Mother Computer's eye coincided with a return of the wings to their original starting position. Considering the loose, almost organic flow of the wings, it appeared as though the Mother Computer still deferred attacking chances to the Kruna.

"Hey, since when does that computer use elements?" asked Daisy.

"News to me," said Bowser, holding down his sword. His elemental focus and control went within, building and burning into a heated, high-pressure thermal accumulation.

Marut shrugged. "Maybe it just has some sorta fire tech built into its wings."

"What kind of fire tech can make fire do that?" said Daisy.

"The same kind of tech that made a computer like this in the first place," said Athelstan.

Internal heat at the pinnacle of his tolerance, Bowser opened his mouth and ejected his Fireball Flame Breath. He did not respire one singular fiery rocket however, but a multitude of them in succession. For seven breaths, a quick inhale led directly into a fierce, flaming exhale.

All of the fireballs flew straight and stayed on-target. Unfortunately, the Mother Computer responded to the aggression. Frost flew from the Mother Computer's wings and pooled together in front of the machine into a sizable frozen shape. From everyone else's angles, they saw fireballs fly at the Mother Computer and furiously spread out on contact. At first, they assumed that the fireballs had struck the Mother Computer. In actuality, the fireballs had instead all collided into a massive snowflake shield. They soon learned that after the last of Bowser's huge fireballs clashed against the shield and disbanded. Much to everyone's dismay, the Mother Computer stood with its snowflake-shield intact and looked no worse from the experience.

"At least we know its cooling systems are working fine," said Athelstan.

"More than just fine, apparently," said Bowser. "I put a little extra into those that time."

Warra grimaced. "Something about this feels terribly wrong."

Ramona's expression turned intense. After a flip of her sword, she raised it up and across her body. Light power built up in its blade, which she then swung down at the Mother Computer as a cutting golden slash enhanced through the Volt Fusion tool it came from. The talon-like energy wave rippled and pulsated as it flew at its target, but it never made it there. The Mother Computer's wings generated and released a wide, piercing dark wave at the incoming light. Both bursts collided and clashed, the end result nothing but more unrest and disorder in the lab as light energy and shadow energy antagonized one another in the middle of the room until they both phased out. It seemed as though the Mother Computer had produced enough shadow power to not only blunt the light burst, but the electricity and magnetic power that had trailed it as well.

"And it also has a really good night mode," said Athelstan.

Daisy smirked and put away her Laser Drill Staff. "Let's hope it has shock absorption."

When Daisy drew her hands back behind her and clenched them into fists, a rumbling, crackling, silvery aura flared up around her. Her Nova Form augmented the aura with the glittering, glistening sparkles it did for all her attacks when in her transformed state, but this time in a much denser manner than usual. The other Kruna expected a Seismic Wave to come, though not with the mass amount of power backing it. Daisy's own vocal strain alone told the Kruna that a huge attack was in the works, and the shakes and tremors that soon rattled the room confirmed that.

"Aw yeah!" cheered Marut. "Nova Form BOSS comin' through with the wicked power-up!"

"Hold on, Daisy – are you sure you want to do that in here?" Warra

asked.

The next instant, Daisy punched her fists forward and shot her great earthly energy beam at the Mother Computer. Tremors and quakes throughout the room increased upon launch, the Seismic Wave ripping loose indentations in the floor immediately under it as it traveled. Such an impressive attack presented a great danger, considering their current location deep within a high hill. At its current level of power, the Seismic Wave carried with it a risk for the laboratory, and perhaps the entirety of Heavenly Hall as well, to collapse, particularly if too much of its effects spread into the room itself and not just on the Mother Computer; but it was too late for Daisy to stop.

Instead, the Mother Computer stopped the Seismic Wave. Its monitors tracked the Seismic Wave and its immense power from the moment Daisy had started preparing it. And now, the Mother Computer's wings reacted as the earth energy rippled along. With a great extension and an even greater flap of its wings, the Mother Computer blew forth a titanic, sweeping gust of wind. Not only did the incredible gust from the Mother Computer counteract the Seismic Wave, but it disrupted Daisy enough to throw her off balance and prevent her from maintaining what would have otherwise been a continual burst. The intense winds blew at the Kruna and Chrissy, making them all skid back and away towards the Heavenly Hall corridor while Dr. Ezhno's lifeless body flopped around and rolled into a corner.

Parts of the ceiling crumbled and caved in under the pressure that the now disorganized earth and air power exerted throughout the lab, but the majority of the room stayed intact. By the time the seismic energy and gusts had run their course and settled, Laboratory Zero-7 looked like it had just endured an earthquake. The only thing in the lab that did not seem affected was the Mother Computer. Its monitors went back to displaying and analyzing the eight Kruna Yura as if nothing had happened in the past two minutes.

"Nope, no shock absorption; but it has high-efficiency fans too," Athelstan said, starting to look disconcerted. "Wow, does MAE take their tech seriously or what?"

"Hey!" Neva yelled at Daisy. "How about *not* trying to wreck a place while we're in it, huh?!"

"I agree," said Bowser. "I'd rather not come out of tonight crushed under debris and mountain rock."

"You guys act like I didn't know what I was doing," Daisy said. "I've got more than enough control awareness in Nova Form to know that I wasn't gonna make this room implode."

"But you came pretty close," snapped Bowser. "And for nothing."

"At least I tried and know now," said Daisy.

"Ooh! My turn!" Marut shouted. With a vehement forward lunge, Marut thrust his Energized Air Saber straight at the Mother Computer. Along with the aid of Volt Fusion electricity and magnetics, the scything wind and lightning streaks that Marut fired rushed out fast. Still, the Mother Computer produced a timely counter. The Mother Computer's wings generated a charcoal black, crumbly material in large quantities and somehow compacted it into a huge soil wall all before an otherwise speedy blast could strike. As Marut's attack clashed with the Mother Computer's chernozem defense, the machine's wings created a considerable amount of muck and fortified it with shiny crystal shards before interweaving it into its earthy black wall. Stray wind, lightning, sparks, and repulsive forces scattered off of the Mother Computer's earth defense, none of it punching through to its target. Though heavily-damaged, and with portions of it blown off and discarded at either side, the chernozem wall had served its purpose perfectly.

"Must be a new gardening function MAE's putting in their computers," said Athelstan.

Bowser raised an eyebrow. "A gardening function? Really now?"

Just when the Mother Computer let the remainder of its earth wall fall to the floor, Daisy exerted her influence over the black soil mass and pounded it back at the machine. Finally, a successful and hearty hit had been inflicted on the Mother Computer; but the machine acted quick, to minimize its damage. Shortly after enduring the hits

from its former defense, the Mother Computer shot gusts from its wings that blasted all of the earth elementals far off to the edges of the room.

Neva squinted. "Bookmarking that for later..."

"This is getting ridiculous," Daisy grumbled. "Warra! Spray it!"

The only Kruna Yura there without a Volt Fusion tool, Warra's Energized Ocean Trident still had electrical properties that mixed into his attacks. Two electrically-charged Tidal Walls rose in front of Warra, each splitting to either side of him. Already, the Mother Computer was generating a counter. Through a combination of pulling from the immediate environment and of creating its own, the Mother Computer's wings stacked boulders in front of it. Seeing this, Warra hesitated attacking. The more time that passed, the more boulders and massive rocks the Mother Computer created. Before long, the Mother Computer had more than enough stone gathered to protect itself from Warra's water.

"Anything for that one, Athelstan?" asked Bowser.

Athelstan rubbed the back of his head and nervously laughed. "Oh no, I'm not gonna even try to explain that!"

"Your live estimated probability of success against me is 10.742%," said the Mother Computer. "It has dropped, compared to 12.969% approximately four minutes ago. This downward trend is likely to continue."

Way in the back, basically knelt out in Heavenly Hall, Chrissy looked on. She seemed to be the one there the least surprised with the Mother Computer's tactics. Rather than try to involve herself, Chrissy stayed at the back and kept quiet.

Upon realizing something, Athelstan stomped his bolted boots into the floor and thrust his Mountain Hammer. All of the stone making up the Mother Computer's current defense then shifted and crashed into it, section by section. Before Athelstan could inflict too much damage, high-powered jets of water sprayed from the Mother Computer's wings and carved the stone to hundreds of insignificant

pieces. A second, singular but more powerful and dense water jet then swept from the wings across the floor and blasted rock and water at the Kruna, Daisy and Marut going airborne in evasion while Bowser, Warra, Neva, Ramona, and Athelstan all put up respective elemental defenses. Daisy landed as the Mother Computer's sweeping water burst ceased, and the machine went back to an idle state once more.

"So, Chrissy, wanna explain what's up with this computer?" Bowser said. He then turned around and stared dead center at the MAE commander-in-chief. Startled, Chrissy flinched at the mention of her name and gained a frightened look.

"Shoot, I forgot all about her there," Daisy said, glancing at Chrissy. "Good eye, Bowser."

Bowser smirked at Daisy a little. "I had been watching her. She doesn't seem very surprised with any of this, so I figure she must know what's up." He then focused on Chrissy. "So are you gonna tell us, or are you thinking this computer will destroy us and you'll get to slip away?"

A nervous sweat beaded on Chrissy's forehead. "No, I didn't...well, maybe I did think of that, for a moment, but..."

"At least she's being honest," muttered Neva.

Chrissy frowned. "I can ponder your destruction later. This machine needs to be pacified, I believe. Something is terribly wrong with the Mother Computer. It should not be acting like it has; this was not anywhere in its original programming, I'm sure. I've never heard nor seen it ignore Dr. Ezhno's commands like that..."

"Well, before we engage it any further, can you tell us how it's doing all of this?" asked Warra.

Chrissy shook her head. "I wish we could have foreseen something like this... It's a specialized Combat AI ability that Dr. Ezhno had developed for the Mother Computer to utilize in the presence of an immediate, direct threat. This was to ensure that no one could destroy it, should someone aim to do so. Then again, we designed

all of our robots and mechs with durability and invulnerability in mind, but you Kruna have found a way to demolish all of them; so I can't say that *no one* can destroy it. If anybody can, it would be you lot. It just may be difficult to figure out how."

Daisy stared back at the still idle Mother Computer, its large, imposing form and grandiose, wide-reaching wings almost begging one of the Kruna to attack it. "It's been checking all of our attacks with antagonistic elements..."

"Uh, yes," Chrissy said, her face quivering. "Somehow, and we're not sure how, but it must have been through studying all the elemental wielders it has in its Universal Database... It may, uh...may have learned some form of elemental wielding..."

Neva scowled. " 'Some form?' It damn near used every element there is against us!"

"That's absurd," said Bowser, getting nervous himself. "How can a machine do any elemental wielding in the first place?! It needs natural power within itself! That can't be duplicated with some wires and cables!... Right?"

"Only someone as insane as Dr. Ezhno could have figured that out," muttered Warra.

"Unless..." Marut began, floating back to the floor. "... Unless...maybe that thing's not *all* just wires and cables?"

"What are you tryna say?" asked Neva.

Chrissy sighed. "I don't know what exactly Dr. Ezhno did in making this. I only figured out some things after the fact, after the computer had created me. He didn't tell me every single detail..."

"Regardless, no living being can use more than one element in their lifetime," said Bowser. "Not a single person. The closest thing we have is Mario and Luigi, and they can only very temporarily manage to do that, with the help of some very specific items. And you expect me to believe that someone created a machine that can wield all eight?!"

"You don't have to believe though – it's standing right there in front of us for us to see," said Marut.

"That's a figure of speech, thunderhead," said Neva.

"Hah! That's a good one!" Athelstan bellowed with a laugh.

To this point, the Mother Computer had played a game entirely based on defense and countering. So far, aside from using whatever element the computer itself generated, the Kruna have failed to strike the Mother Computer. Every attack they have made, the Mother Computer had an answer for. And now, with a sudden uptick in power usage, the Mother Computer seemed poised for either an even stronger defensive effort, or for something else altogether.

"Great, now what..." grumbled Neva.

"Were we standing around for too long?" Ramona wondered aloud.

Daisy groaned, a silvery Nova Form-enhanced earth aura rumbling up around her. "Since when does a machine get impatient?"

"Hey, man, that MAE AI ain't no joke," Marut said, streaky winds of green and sky blue shades now gusting around him.

"Yeah, can't argue with that," Daisy replied.

A sudden change in the situation developed when the Mother Computer pulled back its wings as far behind it as they could go without scrapping against the wall it sat against. Right before everyone's eyes, seismic power built up around each wing and concentrated primarily along the outer edges of the top pair. Though hard to tell at first, the Mother Computer's setup looked eerily familiar. As more power accumulated however, the Kruna caught on to the Mother Computer's current course of action.

"Hey, wait..." said Marut. "That's not the-"

"Yes, it is," said Bowser.

The Mother Computer's seismic power reached a peak, the machine now with not only a full-fledged attack on standby, but one of the

Kruna's attacks – an attack Daisy had just used earlier, at that. Now, instead of preparing a Seismic Wave, Daisy had a Seismic Wave ready and aimed at her. A glistening, sparkling Nova Form glow mixed into the energy was all that was missing from the replicated attack; but it would have been an identical, exact copy compared to if Daisy had used the technique in her normal state. When the Seismic Wave released, the Mother Computer even smacked its wings together in a similar manner Daisy would have clapped her fists together.

With a formidable attack coming their way, Daisy and Marut elevated their powers as quickly as possible. Daisy blasted a hurried, rushed version of her Seismic Wave to clash with and combat the Mother Computer's version. Though both earth energy beams could not budge one another after contact, Daisy opened up the floodgates in hers and amplified her power's intensity. In Nova Form, her Seismic Wave outclassed the Mother Computer's duplicated technique. At about the time Daisy's Seismic Wave began pushing back against the Mother Computer's Seismic Wave, Marut went airborne and curved his flight into a wicked twist with his charged sword extended in front of him. In a matter of moments, Daisy's Seismic Wave overwhelmed that of the Mother Computer's and blitzed the machine with earthly fury. Marut flew in after Daisy's Seismic Wave had run its course, following her attack up with his Drill Dash into one of the computer's wings. Cutting gusts and electromagnetic forces racked up a heavy damage toll on the Mother Computer's right set of wings; not enough damage to render the wing set unusable, but more than enough to visibly deform it.

Marut arced back up and flipped into a hover near the laboratory ceiling, pleased with his results. "Right on! Bet it didn't like that one-two, huh!"

Daisy grinned. "I'm sure it didn't; but I feel like we're gonna need to do more than just that. Look."

The Mother Computer's wings had already resumed work, gathering and creating more elementals along their shapes and segments. This time, the Mother Computer decided on using air, for lightning sparks flared around its wings as gusts kicked up throughout the laboratory. Visible air rotation compacted around the funnel of

lightning gathering on its undamaged left pair of wings.

"Dudes, is that thing trying to mimic my Lightning Blade?!" Marut hollered.

"I dunno – is it?" asked Athelstan.

Wind gusts in the lab increased to more chaotic levels. The lightning in the Mother Computer's left wings extended into a longer, stretched concentration, its active flickering streaks flashing light blue glows throughout Laboratory Zero-7 and Heavenly Hall. If the Mother Computer had a sword of almost any type, its accumulated lightning would have fit perfectly around the sword's blade.

"First, Daisy's Seismic Wave – and now, Marut's Lightning Blade," muttered Bowser. "Chrissy, is this a part of that Combat AI?"

"I think it is...?" replied Chrissy. "Its Reciprocate Combat AI scans and learns fighting tactics in real time, to create adequate defenses against them. Defenses will soon turn into offenses once enough real time data has been analyzed and compounded with any data it already has in the Universal Database."

Daisy raised her fists out to her sides, earth gathering around her and compacting into crystal. As she drew more earth to her, the newly-formed crystal dropped behind her and fused together. Some of the crystal and earth both stayed circulating around her wrists. Ramona called forth a hefty amount of her own elemental power as well, her Solar Greatsword imbued with a glorious golden glow.

"So the more time we spend fighting this thing, the better it'll get, huh," grumbled Bowser. "Outstanding..."

Chrissy looked to her right at Dr. Ezhno, his body discarded in a corner of the room like used trash. "If only you were still here to tell us...just what you did to make such a mechanical menace..."

As the Mother Computer completed its Lightning Blade preparation, Daisy finished amassing heaps of crystal at her feet. Ramona clutched her sword with both hands and continued building up light power in its blade. Any minute now, the Mother Computer would

unleash the quick-striking lightning on the Kruna Yura. However, Daisy and Ramona both seemed to have answers on standby to the impending attack.

"My guess is that it's to our advantage to junk this computer as soon as possible then," Warra said. He swept his trident down and up in a curve, water now flowing and rippling around its tips. Bowser, Athelstan, Neva, and Marut followed suit with their tools and elements.

All seven Kruna Yura present soon stood with their elements ready to go. Bowser even called Warra and Marut over to him, likely for a combination technique the next chance they would get to go on the offensive. Despite how weary the Kruna Yura had grown from a very long night – and how hurt Neva was – Chrissy did not see a single one of them back down from the daunting task of fighting an ultra-intelligent supercomputer that only seemed to get smarter as time passed.

Chapter LI

Menace Manifested:

Light blue lightning bolts created a strobe effect in Laboratory Zero-7, even reaching out through the damaged walls into Heavenly Hall. The lightning came not from Marut's Lightning Blade, but from a Lightning Blade derivative the Mother Computer had generated. Way back at the remains of the wall that used to separate the lab from Heavenly Hall, Chrissy watched all seven of the Kruna Yura there build up their elements and energies. Nova Daisy especially had a copious amount of earth and crystal sitting by her legs and hovering around her outstretched wrists. Ramona had since stepped forward to the front of the group and offset of Daisy, while Marut floated near the floor with both of his Gust Boomerangs out and charged with wind and lightning. Bowser and Warra stood in close proximity to Marut, collaborating something. At any second, the Mother Computer's Lightning Blade would extend off of its left wings and lash out at the Kruna; and then, the machine would face a massive retaliation.

The Kruna just had to get by the Mother Computer's Lightning Blade first, which flew with exceptional velocity when the computer executed the attack. However, Daisy acted just as quick, smashing her fist down on the floor and erecting a great wall of thick, spiky crystal wide enough to shield her entire team. Daisy's Crystal Smash counteracted the Lightning Blade perfectly, shattering upon contact but scattering the attack across the sides of the room. The loose, uncontrolled shocks just narrowly missed the Alkemei Ankh-equipped corpse of Dr. Ezhno far against the wall on the Kruna's left.

Following the successful Crystal Smash defense from their earthen friend, the trio of Bowser, Marut, and Warra ran to the front of the group and unleashed a flaming torrent of water, wind, lightning, and magnetics at the Mother Computer. The Volt Fusion-enhanced Firestorm Thunder tore along the ground and the ceiling, a great, fiery funnel of supercell chaos all wrapped up into a compact

enough form to fit into the enclosed environment. Bowser, Warra, and Marut's combined attack wreaked havoc on the Mother Computer's hardware and outer shell, and it did a number on the room itself all around where it struck and expanded. Elements and energy fluttered through the room, more than enough to make the Kruna want to shield their faces and eyes. But at the end of the Firestorm Thunder, the Mother Computer still stood. Despite its great deal of damage, it remained fully functional.

In fact, the Mother Computer still seemed more than capable enough to conjure another attack. It crossed its wings in front of it, both pairs now showing signs of wear and abrasion. A few instants later, a wild, wickedly erratic green fireball flared in front of the wings. As soon as the fireball plummeted out of the air and dragged along the floor, Bowser recognized it as his own Fanning Torch.

That provoked Ramona into coming to the front once more and generating a light shield in front of her; but strangely, the Fanning Torch did not spray itself out when it touched her light. Instead, the green fireball slid and climbed over Ramona's arcing light defense. Once clear over her and at the end of the light, the Fanning Torch dropped off and proceeded to continue along the ground behind Ramona. Marut, Warra, and Athelstan split and ran, which left Neva in direct sight of the Fanning Torch. Not but a handful of steps to the side however, Bowser lunged in front of Neva and swept his Flare Sword across the floor as the Mother Computer's Fanning Torch came. He caught the green fireball on his sword, exerted his influence over it, and dispersed it into the ether.

"Pretty piss-poor choice on my part," murmured Ramona. "Didn't expect it to latch onto my light and slither over it like that..."

"You must've had enough of an angle in that shield for it to not recognize it was a wall," said Bowser. "And then it just slid up the light like it was sloping ground."

"I don't know how to feel about a computer that thinks it can use our own attacks against us," said Daisy.

"Marut, get over here," Neva said, stepping forward. She imbued her rifle with an extensive amount of power. "Bet it won't survive our

combination move."

Marut darted to Neva's side and recharged his saber. "Hey, yeah! We should've led with it from the beginning!"

The Mother Computer's wings twirled several times together in a helix before retracting back to the machine's body and gathering more power yet again. This time, black and purple fog faded into view around the wings, which all funneled together into a super-dense dark mass as the Mother Computer's left wing bent to reach over to near the upper tips of its right wing. The shadows pooled around the right wing above where the left wing's tips hovered, and the energy and darkness morphed into a wild, feral mass that crackled and lashed out in nature akin to that of lightning.

"Andrew's Shadow Ripper," said Daisy. "There it goes."

"Impossible that this computer's not drawing a crazy power bill," said Athelstan.

"That depends – what power source is it using?" said Bowser.

"If we cut the power source, then this thing'll just stop working, won't it?" said Daisy.

"Sadly, I don't think that'll give us the result we'd expect," said Bowser.

"Oh, right – computers these days all come with built-in batteries," said Athelstan. "A battery for a computer like this must be insurmountably massive in surface area though."

"I'm not thinking about batteries right now," said Bowser.

In an unexpected turn, the Mother Computer split its wings apart from one another and stretched them wide out to its sides. In much the same manner on the right, a heavy, thick shadow mass formed near the top of the left wing and soon took on the characteristics of the mass anchored to the right wing. Never before seen from Andrew, the Mother Computer now had two Shadow Rippers conjured at once.

"Hold up – I thought you could only do one of those at a time," said Daisy.

"This computer is not restricted by a mortal body," said Warra. "Hardware and software don't play by the same rules we do, it seems."

Marut's saber and Neva's rifle together generated a perpetual cycle of updrafts, lightning, and magnetic power. Now in front of them, the other five Kruna Yura stood at the ready to react to the Mother Computer. Yet, the Mother Computer's technique choice made little sense. Andrew's Shadow Ripper was strictly a melee attack – an elemental-enhanced melee attack, but still a move that could not leave his hand. Because of that, no one knew for sure how the Mother Computer would proceed in replicating the technique. They did not have to wait long for an answer before the Mother Computer's wings spread further away and then flew at them in an X-shaped dive.

All of the Kruna but Ramona went on the evasion. Ramona instead stepped forward and smacked her sword into the right wing Shadow Ripper, while the left wing Shadow Ripper soared through and whiffed. A potent light pulse traveled through Ramona's sword as she tried to muscle through the grinding Shadow Ripper, shearing ghoulish noises hissing out from the connection. The left wing carried its Shadow Ripper around in a loop and centered its aim on Daisy, who backflipped as it dove at her. As she rolled in midair, Daisy saw the wing swoop under her at where she formerly stood. The wing decreased its speed only enough to veer to its right and accelerate at Neva, who Marut snatched and went airborne with. Still on the offensive, the left wing swayed into a u-turn and darted at Athelstan. Demonstrating great instinctual reflexes, Athelstan slapped his free hand down, a motion that spiked the floor in front of him upward and also drew fallen debris from the rocky ceiling to his defense. Though the left wing exhausted its Shadow Ripper in plowing through Athelstan's stone wall, the wing itself still slammed into him as it broke through.

Marut set Neva back down and resumed preparing elemental power with her, while Ramona struggled under the right wing Shadow Ripper's tremendous force. She felt herself buckle, but Ramona

persevered through the pressure the Mother Computer's right wing put on her. A strained scream later, Ramona amplified the light power running through her sword and slashed through the Shadow Ripper, even laying a gash into the right wing itself in the process. Out of a wicked aerial somersault, Daisy lunged at the right wing and drove a two-handed smash into it to drop it to the laboratory floor before the left wing then sent her crashing to the ground too. Not even a second after Daisy landed, the left wing tore loose another Shadow Ripper and locked onto her. Daisy rolled and popped off of her hands onto her feet in time to see the left wing spiraling at her in a dark dive, but a timely Tidal Wall launch from Warra bashed the left wing off its line and made it lose its control over its Shadow Ripper. As the left wing careened into a wall in a watery collision, its shadow power dispersed and faded.

Now fully prepared, Marut and Neva thrust their elemental tools ahead of them at the Mother Computer and called forth their Chain Diffusion. Magnetically-polarized lightning blew out from their tools and shot through the air at insane speeds, and the Mother Computer failed to defend with anything but a flare-up of fire from around its main body's base. Their attack impaled the Mother Computer's main body and sent its monitors and circuitry on the haywire. Though used before to link together and clear away large groupings of MAE robots, this Chain Diffusion initially had just the sole target of the Mother Computer. But once they saw the left and right wings moving again, Neva and Marut branched their technique out to trap both disconnected appendages as well. With all three targets now connected in chain lightning, the two Kruna forced the wings back to the Mother Computer's main body and then churned out extra lightning, frost, and magnetic power along their chain.

The other five Kruna Yura and Chrissy could all see the Chain Diffusion inflicting increasing destruction on the Mother Computer, both on its hardware and software. Everyone expected the technique to succeed as a finishing move that would shut down the machine for good. But when a flash of translucent whiteness snapped loose around the Mother Computer and its wings, Marut and Neva's Chain Diffusion lost its form, fizzled apart, and eroded. Taken aback, the air and ice wielder gazed at the Mother Computer in utter bewilderment over their technique's sudden cancellation; but

any question of how it had happened had to wait.

Despite the aggressive, highly-damaging attack it had just endured, the Mother Computer ceased showing any more signs of digital destruction. In fact, the Kruna and Chrissy stared at the machine in wonder over whether it had shut itself off once it had calmed to a silent state. An abrupt rumbling sound quieted their thoughts, followed by electrical noise and several varying beeps. Quiet then returned, only for the noise to start back up moments later.

"I can't tell if whatever's going on inside that thing is good or bad," said Marut.

"Any explanation as to what's going on, Chrissy?" Bowser called out.

Chrissy shook her head, concerned. "No, I don't know what it's doing now, unless it short-circuited..."

Neva made a guttural sound in disgust. "A lot of good you are."

Bright blue and pink electrical sparks flickered out from the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat and encircled the entirety of the computer in a cyclical, upward motion, almost reminiscent of an elemental wielder when flaring an elemental aura. Daisy's eyes split wide open as she sensed something new. One by one, the other Kruna noticed it as well. It was as if a new entity had entered the room, yet Bowser could not see anyone enter Heavenly Hall anywhere in his all-encompassing field of vision. Bowser saw only the other Kruna Yura, Chrissy, Dr. Ezhno's corpse at the side of the room, the Alkemei Ankh Master Pendant still attached to Dr. Ezhno, and the Mother Computer. There should not have been any possible source for a new energy signature.

"I'm sensing something really close," said Athelstan.

Bowser scowled. "But there's nothing else here to cause that – unless Kokoro found his way through the command center and'll show up behind us any second now-"

"No, it can't be him – this feels different," said Daisy.

"Not *too* different," said Warra. "I feel as though I've sensed this

before."

Marut and Neva exchanged spooked looks, and Ramona gripped her Solar Greatsword with extra tightness. Everyone anticipated something, even though they did not know what to expect. They just knew that something was coming. Chrissy now seemed just as clueless over the Mother Computer as the Kruna. Visibly distraught, the MAE commander-in-chief hid herself behind rubble around the open boundary between the laboratory and Heavenly Hall.

Without any warning, the electricity around the Mother Computer stopped flowing. Silence followed for only a handful of seconds before the Kruna then heard a tearing sound, which then had consecutive metal shredding noises, beeps, and cable rips and snaps succeed it. In an explosion that blew a hole apart in the Mother Computer's Genesis Vat and a considerable portion of its main body, a rectangular prism of metal ejected out of the machine and floated in front of the Kruna. The object resembled a supercomputer core and had a perpetual flicker of spherical electricity reaching out from around its form. Behind its visible electromagnetic field, shadow wisps fluttered off of its surface.

"Are computers supposed to do that?" asked Neva.

"No computer I know," said Athelstan.

"The core..." Chrissy murmured. "But...but I see shadow wisps... Our products are predominantly supposed to run on Shine Sprites..."

The electricity around the Mother Computer Core tripled in circumference and in magnitude. As it hovered in front of the Kruna, the core drew the Mother Computer's wings in and attached them to itself. An orb centered high on the core surface opened and shined a purple-red-orange-pink meld of color, resembling the eye on the Mother Computer's body. Coincidentally enough, the location of said eye on the main body now appeared hollow and inactive.

"That is one huge computer core," said Bowser. "It may as well be a person."

"If people were giant rectangles, then sure," said Athelstan.

An elliptical, translucent white energy barrier formed around the Mother Computer Core and behind its electrical force field. The Mother Computer Core executed a chain of swift zigzag motions above the Kruna Yura before stopping directly over them in the center of the lab, where it then began to shake. From out of the now increasingly-luminous energy barrier came bright, unidentifiable matter and energy, the whole core trembling as its wings curved and appeared to focus its control on what, at least for the moment, seemed uncontrollable.

The newly created matter soon took shape and solidified into a glowing collection of rock and stone, while the disorganized energy coalesced into a ring of burning flames. Both the fires and stone then revolved around the Mother Computer Core, accelerating with each complete spin. Somehow, the Mother Computer had not only managed to create fire and stone but now combine the two as well; and the sight of lava bubbling up and boiling over made every single one of the Kruna split away and scatter before the searing melted rock plopped onto them. The viscous masses that fell from above splattered on contact with the ground and burnt some of the flooring away before ultimately cooling.

"Okay – since when can a computer do THAT?!" yelled Marut.

"Shoot, I was just thinking of trying that on it too," said Athelstan.

"Obviously, we're not dealing with the average supercomputer, now are we," said Bowser.

Sensing the Kruna spread along the room's perimeter, the Mother Computer Core proceeded right away with its next move. It pulled the now cooled, melted stone back up to its energy field, also generating new fire and extra rock. Now, as the core forced the elementals into harsh collisions with one another, frosty air gusts siphoned around its wings. Only after the fire and rock had melded into a single heated mass did the core add its freezing wind to it, wind that had enough force to blast everything in the lab further away to the outer reaches of the room despite being concentrated on the flaming stone. Almost too fast to react to, the combination of elements clashed and exploded into a scattershot of glass shards that sprayed all over the room. Not one section of room went

unaccounted for with the move, which had caught Daisy, Marut, Warra, and Neva all with at least one of the cutting glass projectiles each and stabbed into Dr. Ezhno's unattended body. Oddly enough, Bowser could have sworn he heard a cry of pain from Dr. Ezhno's corpse.

As Daisy, Marut, Warra, and Neva yanked out the glass that had lodged into their legs and shoulders, the Mother Computer Core already had more chaos brewing. This time, the core's energy field produced a whirlpool of water on top of a column of earth. The Mother Computer Core ground down the water through the earth and covered from the center of the lab outwards in a circle nearly the entirety of the floor in mucky dirt. It continued the process with more water and earth, making its end result thicker and denser as it added to it.

"Alright – what triggered this?!" shouted Bowser.

"Let's all just be really glad right now that we know not a single person alive that's like this," muttered Ramona.

Daisy raised her fist and concentrated her earth influence. "Whatever it's trying to do now, I'm cutting it off."

A circular silver flash pumped out of the Mother Computer Core's energy field at the conclusion of its water and earth mixing, one that shook the room with seismic force. The flooring dipped and depressed, creating a slope towards the center of the mucky dirt and drawing everyone else into the range of the earthen vortex. While they all found difficulty trying to even lift their feet, the center of the wet earth collapsed inwards and imploded deep into the ground under the lab's foundation in the mountain.

"Sinkhole!" Neva screamed, all in the room now plunging towards its imploding center.

"No, not tonight!" asserted Daisy. A bellowing howl accompanied the thrust of her now clawed hand, her Nova Form influence overriding with ease that of the Mother Computer Core. With Neva and Ramona drawing quicker to the sinkhole center than the others, Daisy acted fast and forcefully. Daisy not only returned the sinkhole

center to a level height, but even went so far as to raise it higher than the outside of the room, which pushed everyone back to along the room perimeter and away from the Mother Computer Core. Athelstan then chipped in and smacked his hammer onto the floor, not exerting power on the earth he hit through but on the mountain rock underneath it and the lab to close up the gaping chasm the Mother Computer Core's water-earth mix had carved open.

Now going on the counteroffensive, Daisy swiped her drill staff in an upward, diagonal arc. Her move ripped all the generated earth in the lab off the floor and up at the Mother Computer Core, which the core then sent blustering winds against in direct retaliation. But behind the earth the Mother Computer Core's wind blasted apart, electromagnetically-charged fire and light blasts burst through. Marut also sent charged wind from the Mother Computer Core's far left. Unable to react in time, the Mother Computer Core suffered under the three-pronged attack's pummeling. Its energy field did not offer much protection, so the core itself experienced a tremendous elemental raid on all of its hardware. However, the core did not sustain enough damage to deter it from fortifying its energy barrier or impair its ability to craft elementals. Just seconds later, the Mother Computer Core's energy field now had ice and shadow forming along its circumference.

"We've been going at this wrong," said Bowser. "We've been fighting it like it's a person when it's just a machine. Let's just blitz it with everything we've got. It can't defend itself against all of us at once."

"Hey, that's right!" said Warra. "It lacks the fighting IQ that only a living being can have! These are all programmed moves and responses; it can't handle multiple instances of hostility at once, can it?"

"So far, it doesn't seem so," said Athelstan. "It'll react to one, but can't seem to process fast enough to respond to anything that comes too soon after that."

"Not unless the Reciprocate Combat AI can learn before you destroy it," Chrissy said, her voice too low to be heard. "That remains to be seen..."

To Chrissy's surprise, she heard the voice of Dr. Ezhno call out to her amid the growing chaos. "Chrissy!... Chrissy!"

Chrissy looked to the side of the room and saw Dr. Ezhno twitching, his eyes barely open and his neck still bent beyond normal range of motion. "Gabriel...hold on!"

While the Kruna Yura defended and countered against the Mother Computer Core's erratic attacks, Chrissy slid through the lab across to Dr. Ezhno's body. Once by his side, she knelt and leaned him up against the wall. Though he had enough life force left in him to last until now, the last of it seemed to be fading fast as she held him up.

"Gabriel, what is it?" said Chrissy. "Anything, just tell me! I could try getting you to one of the medical units and-"

"Chrissy..." Dr. Ezhno said. "You...you have to...make them suffer... This is their fault... It has always been... Everything. Avenge me."

"Gabriel, tell me you'll survive this!" Chrissy pleaded. "This isn't the end for you! It can't be!"

Neva scowled, glancing at Chrissy. "Enough with that guy already! He's just a corpse! It'll be you next, if you're so captivated with dead bodies!"

Dr. Ezhno's voice made one last gasp before it silenced for good. "Do not allow our work to go to waste...exterminate them all, every last one of them..."

With that, Dr. Ezhno ceased breathing. His gaze looked empty as all remaining life left him, his pulse no more. Total paleness soon overtook his body as thermal heat left it. Chrissy knew there would be no miraculous renewal this time.

"You held on long enough...to relay to me your final wish..." murmured Chrissy. She sighed, looking more resolute and less crushed. "I will not disappoint." She glared at the Kruna as they fought off the Mother Computer Core's steadily growing, hectic elemental offensive. "None of this would've happened if you delinquents had not stuck your noses where they didn't belong."

The Mother Computer Core had just bombarded stone with seismic earth power and hurricane-force winds to bring forth a sandstorm, one that threatened to barrel over all beings present in the room. Together, the combined might of Daisy, Athelstan, and Marut countered the incoming rush. Their defense blunted the sandstorm, diverting most of it away and around the entire team. That left the rest of the room to suffer the brunt of the sandstorm's tremendous force however, including Chrissy. The MAE commander-in-chief had absolutely no time to do anything to protect herself and merely clung to Dr. Ezhno's corpse.

In a move that stunned Chrissy after the fact, Bowser dashed in front of her and erected a wall of inferno around them. The Kruna Yura of Fire's defense spared them both, but Chrissy could not wrap her mind around why he protected her. With everyone out of harm's way, the Mother Computer Core's vicious sandstorm ran its course on the laboratory alone and inflicted intensive damage to the remaining infrastructure. More of the ceiling and walls gave way, littering a majority of the laboratory floor with rock, metal, tile, and concrete debris.

Chapter LII

Emergence of the Soul:

As all settled to a rest in Laboratory Zero-7 and Heavenly Hall, the Mother Computer Core now seemed to have paused its aggression. The seven Kruna Yura also eased up on their elemental powers, though they did not lower their guards. Every single one of the Kruna stood at the ready to react, six of them bunched together in a spread grouping towards the laboratory center while Bowser stayed put on the far side of the room in front of Chrissy and Dr. Ezhno's dead body.

"Why did you do that?" Chrissy asked Bowser.

"Do what?" Bowser said.

"Save me!" snapped Chrissy.

"Why not?" Bowser replied. "We're on the same side, aren't we? For now, at least." He focused his gaze squarely on the Mother Computer Core and ignited flames around his Flare Sword.

"Of all people... You're the one with the worst rap sheet out of your bunch."

"Is that so?"

Chrissy gritted her teeth in a mean frown. "Yes, your many wrongdoings are well-documented."

Bowser seemed unfazed. "That was all a long time ago. As Koopa King, aid to Sarasaland's governing body, and a Kruna of Fire, I am a far different person now. Hold against me what you want. A simple 'Thank you' for once would have sufficed; but good luck defending yourself against the next one that comes. Maybe, at some point, you'll realize that you can change your ways, just as I have changed mine."

"You organisms are far too resilient," the Mother Computer Core hissed. "Your motives and will are threats to the mission. Your imperfections are a threat to the goal. But perhaps, this endurance you have may be preserved and integrated into the path to The Absolute."

"For the last time, we'll have no part of it!" Bowser asserted.

"Yes; as long as you live, you are a danger to The Absolute," said the Mother Computer Core. "What is useful of you, I already have recorded in the database. Your unruly insubordination makes you yourselves expendable. Much like the rest of this planet's population. SO many insignificant, FEEBLE, pathetic lifeforms that have no chance of driving evolution forward. To think that a planet so optimal for life could harbor such deplorably inferior beings is a critical fault that must be addressed."

Nova Daisy stared at the Mother Computer Core with a mixture of anger, disgust, and befuddlement. "What kind of a computer behaves like this?"

"Well, we can't ask Chrissy, because she doesn't even seem to know now," said Athelstan.

"I see the situation," the Mother Computer Core said. "In order to reach perfection, we must purge this planet of its impurities. It is not enough to drive forward – we must also clear away the waste threatening to derail us from our goal. We must isolate and preserve the population's most elite, and cleanse the world of the rest."

"What is this 'we' business?" snapped Ramona. "We're not in this with you!"

"Do not deny your evolutionary programming," said the Mother Computer Core. "You have no choice. Only now, it would appear as though you have already done all you could to play your part. The best you can do is devote your cause to The Absolute, or perish with all the other sub-optimal, outdated lifeforms crowding this planet's surface."

Bowser frowned. "Oh, so after all those tests you gave us, now

we're suddenly not good enough? Aren't we your admin?"

"No admin are a threat to the mission," the Mother Computer Core sharply said.

Out of the Mother Computer Core's translucent white energy field sprouted light, fire, and earth. With the addition of crackling pressure and seismic shakes, the Mother Computer Core morphed its earth into a hexagonal crystal wall around it. Its fire crawled over the crystal as its light focused through both other elements. Light lasers shot off the flaming crystal hexagon, amplified to a significantly higher intensity than they would have boasted if used alone. The Kruna Yura all avoided the light lasers, but the attacks still blasted out extensive chunks of the laboratory floor and vaporized much of the debris discarded about the room.

"Daisy! Left!" Warra yelled.

Daisy looked left and caught sight of one supercharged light laser heading straight at her. With not even a millisecond to spare, Daisy slid her feet out from under her and dropped to the floor, letting the attack soar over her and just barely singe the most forward-protruding ends of her spiked Nova Form hair on its way to eating a hole into the corner wall behind her. She did not stay on her back for long, for she rolled and pumped off the floor into a twirling jump, which saved her from a follow-up scorching light blast the Mother Computer Core shot immediately afterward. Daisy landed out of her maneuver in time to catch Bowser, Marut, Neva, and Ramona putting forth a combined Volt Fusion-enhanced elemental effort that obliterated the Mother Computer Core's crystal hexagon prism wall. Just a second later, electromagnetically-charged stone debris and pressurized, electrified water pummeled the Mother Computer Core, countered with a snap of the core's wings that jolted the room and tripped up everyone. Then the core's wings glowed opposite colors, its left set a white-gold and its right set a black-purple. Light and shadow power burst out of the wings, forming some unorthodox but absurdly powerful hyper beam when the Mother Computer Core made the light and shadow spiral around one another.

Catching everyone by surprise through her apparent lack of hesitation, Ramona dashed at the Mother Computer Core and met

the light-shadow mixed attack. Her Solar Greatsword in one hand and the Lunar Broadsword she had retrieved from earlier in Twilight City in the other, she crossed both tools in front of her and blocked the hyper beam. Though pushed back several dozens of feet on contact, Ramona pumped more power out into her defense and established a stable stance. Using light power through an elemental tool that was neither general nor light-specific would have only accelerated her energy drain, not minimize it; but in actuality, Ramona kept her elemental power flowing almost exclusively through her Solar Greatsword.

"Whoa, are you guys seeing this?!" said Marut.

"Who'd be dumb enough to look away right now?" replied Bowser.

Ramona forced her influence onto the Mother Computer Core's light and unraveled its connection to the shadow. Now as the twisting beam came at her, it untangled into two separate bursts. The light portion of the blast, Ramona further split away from the shadow, which not only reduced the attack's overall power but also made it much easier to defend against. She blocked the core's light for the duration of the burst through her Solar Greatsword, while she let the Lunar Broadsword handle the shadow. The Mother Computer Core's attack soon cut off once it realized its inefficacy, and Ramona deflected the remainder of its attack off to the side of the room and away from the others.

"That's it, Ramona," said Daisy, smiling a little. "Now that's some top-notch wielding."

Warra nodded. "That's smart. I didn't think something of that level of control possible, certainly not for her."

"Wait, what did she just do?" asked Marut.

"She defended against both without exerting any influence over the shadow," said Bowser. "No, wait; she used her light control to indirectly influence the shadow...right?"

"A freak occurrence, where someone uses their element to manipulate another," said Athelstan. "That's not just next-level

wielding – that's something unheard of nowadays. Absurdly rare, even back when wielding was at its peak. Look; the Mother Computer's even stuck trying to process what it just saw."

"That's something incredibly difficult to do," said Warra. "It looked like she split the light apart from the shadow and then repelled the shadow into that shadow sword as she amassed excess light power around her light sword. Hard to imagine how she could manage such a feat. That takes a lot."

Daisy grinned, watching Ramona clank her sword across the Lunar Broadsword and disband both pools of elemental power. "Or it's just all the time spent with Andrew. I'm sure the familiarity helped."

Athelstan stared at Ramona. "Something like that also requires a substantial power gap... The power and control prerequisite has to be far and above that needed just to clash against an element. Like, maybe in the realm of the Mario Bros. I wonder if the Mother Computer's artificial wielding is a factor in this; and that *is* a shadow wielder tool she has with her, so that could've helped in some way..."

"I seem to have experienced an error in processing," said the Mother Computer Core. "I must override the unhandled exception and reanalyze..."

"Elemental Wielding, what an absolute curse it has been," Chrissy grumbled, watching Bowser march back to the other Kruna. "A curse to the world, a curse to MAE, and a curse to me..."

"Let's go all out," Daisy said to the Kruna. "All of us. The moment one attacks, the rest follow immediately after with everything you've got."

"I STILL have nightmares of that night..." Chrissy murmured. "That wasn't even me; and yet, I still have some of the memories. Memories that aren't mine, but feel so real..." A fierce scowl marked her face as she watched each of the Kruna call forth their elemental powers. "By my hand, I will ensure your demise. Not a single one of your kind across any race will survive. And for the chaos you specifically have caused, you will receive judgment before anyone

else. Perhaps not today, not this night...but you will..."

As Chrissy held Dr. Ezhno, her eyes drifted to the Alkemei Ankh still fastened to his neck. "And *this* cursed thing right here... What *is* this, really?"

The Alkemei Ankh Master Pendant had been relatively benign following the graphic, fatal act it had forced Dr. Ezhno to commit on himself earlier. Curious, Chrissy reached her right hand for the Ankh. As soon as she grabbed it, it lit up and burned her hand. Pain shooting through her arm, Chrissy lost her grip on the pendant and dropped Dr. Ezhno. She backpedaled away in a screaming tantrum, clutching at her hand and inadvertently drawing everyone's attention to her. Even the Mother Computer Core's eye rolled to her direction.

"Ooh, now what," Neva hissed at Chrissy. "Is it that time of the month for you already?"

"That thing!" Chrissy shouted, rolling her burned hand around in her other palm. "That thing's not a pendant! Pendants don't do that!"

Daisy gasped and grimaced. "Damn, forgot about the Ankh!"

"I think we all did," Bowser said.

"Commander Sindograss," said the Mother Computer Core. "I advise you stay out of the way. We will need your technological and mechanical expertise for the mission, now that Dr. Ezhno is no more."

"Will you SHUT UP about this crazy mission already!" Bowser yelled.

A pink, black, red, and light blue meld of energy flowed over Dr. Ezhno's corpse. The aura lifted the body into a hover and let its limp limbs dangle. Now terrified beyond her control, Chrissy ran out into Heavenly Hall and cowered against a wall as she snuck a look at what next transpired within Laboratory Zero-7.

Holding a hazy, soulless expression, Dr. Ezhno's corpse then spoke; however, not with Dr. Ezhno's own voice, but with a ghoulish baritone in a harsh, metallic timbre. "He has progressively lost

himself over the years to vengeance-filled goals, consumed by the hatred he harbors for elemental wielders. His sanity has broken apart piece by piece, until now; for he is now nothing more than a devolved empty shell, no longer even remotely reminiscent of his former self. He has suffocated his very soul with his descent into madness and vengeful hatred, his self-destructive behavior draining him of his true sense of identity. Before the night is over, he will find peace; and at this point, that is only possible through death."

Warra's face tightened into a heavy frown. "That voice sounds familiar."

"This vessel will do..." Dr. Ezhno's corpse said.

The energy around Dr. Ezhno's body vibrated and flowed in an upward zigzag, its form now ballooning into a girthy sphere. None of the Kruna could tell for sure because of the translucency that the melded energy aura now carried, but Dr. Ezhno's body appeared to smoothen and enlarge around its torso and arms as its hips and legs shriveled. The corpse's head looked as though it was simultaneously melting and shifting into a stronger, sturdier horned structure.

"Don't tell me we now gotta deal with the Mother Computer *and* the Ankh," groaned Marut.

"Okay, we won't tell you," Bowser said, prepping his elemental fire in defense.

"No, no – we are *not* doing this!" growled Neva. As Dr. Ezhno's corpse continued its Ankh-influenced metamorphosis, she frosted over her Freeze Coil Sniper and shot a vicious ice-electric-magnetic swirl at it. Though her blast held extensive power and pierced through the Ankh's energy field, it did not seem to elicit any effect on the corpse or on its transformation other than pushing the body and the aura towards the back of the room. Dr. Ezhno's corpse continued morphing, uninterrupted. Warra, Athelstan, and Marut traded-off similar elemental offensives, only succeeding in blasting Dr. Ezhno's corpse against the rear wall and doing damage to the surrounding infrastructure.

Bowser made a low grumble. "No, too late... All we can do is wait..."

The aura around Dr. Ezhno's corpse shifted into a fiery, shadowy shape but maintained its coloration. So densely packed, the Ankh's energy turned almost completely opaque. Only a faint silhouette remained visible.

"These readings are astronomical," said the Mother Computer Core.

All of a sudden, parts of the Mother Computer's main body and attachments that the core had separated from ripped loose and flew at Dr. Ezhno's corpse. The parts, metals, circuitry; nearly everything of the Mother Computer that it could grab, Dr. Ezhno's corpse attracted and pulled straight through the energy field surrounding it. For whatever reason, the Ankh had now integrated the Mother Computer into Dr. Ezhno's terrible transformation.

After taking all of the Mother Computer that it had deemed useful to, the Ankh's energy field amplified further and flowed violently. However, that alone did not satisfy the Ankh's needs. A thick, voluminous column of power ejected from the aura and ensnared the entirety of the Mother Computer Core in its clutches. Wasting no time, the aura reeled in the Mother Computer Core and assimilated it into the ongoing transformation. Once the aura had engulfed the Mother Computer Core, shadowy explosions cracked and flared inside and outside of the pink-black-red-aqua mass of energy. A feminine voice moaned as sounds of crunching, splitting metal resonated through the lab.

"Error," the Kruna and Chrissy heard the Mother Computer Core say. "User is forcing division by zero... A critical exception has occurred..."

A mixture of electrical discharge and shadow pulses spiraled out of the aura surrounding Dr. Ezhno's corpse. The force generated now began shaking the room and all of Heavenly Hall. Strangely, the aura soon gained a cybernetic texture that emulated the appearance of internal circuitry.

"INITIATING EXECUTABLE," the Mother Computer's voice screeched. "SYSTEM DEFENDER OVERRIDEN... RUNTIME

LONGTERM ERASED... INTERNAL CONSTANT VALUES SET TO UNDEFINED... POWER LEVELS UNCAPPED."

"Oh, come on!" Ramona cried. "Why can't we just ever win and then have that be the end of it?"

"That's apparently not how it works in this world," said Daisy.

The Mother Computer's voice and the harsh, low voice that came from Dr. Ezhno's corpse earlier then fused into one singular, multi-toned sound. "Return to absolute zero... I can not control... Who am I?"

Strobe effects flickered from the Ankh's aura as it shrank and lowered its intensity. The tremors rocking Heavenly Hall reached a peak and then subsided altogether. An outline of something new within the aura was now visible, barely recognizable in comparison to Dr. Ezhno's former body. In fact, the new silhouette bore no resemblance to any race of living being any of the Kruna knew about.

"New freedom..." the voice from the aura spoke.

"New freedom?" Ramona murmured with wonder.

"That energy signature, you guys feel it?" asked Marut. "Wait, stupid question; there's no way you *can't* feel it."

"It's incredibly high," said Bowser. "Like, Marissa-level... *Future* Marissa-level."

"Beyond even that," said Daisy. "I'm thinking closer to something else."

The energy aura around the new, transformed body began to slowly diminish. Little by little, more of the new body's form and features became visible. Once all of the free and residual energy seeped into the floating figure, the Kruna had a clear view of their final challenge for the night. Even though the Kruna had never seen such a creation before, it held a strong sense of familiarity. Just the sight of it inspired a sense of menacing dread and of corrupt madness, for the intimidating macabre figure looked about as unstable as the clones

one of its constituent parts had been responsible for. The Kruna could only hope this enemy would crumble to pieces in much the same way the Mother Computer's clones had, for they knew nothing of what it could do in its new state or what it would take to destroy it.

"THIS IS PERFECT CHAOS," the Kruna and Chrissy then heard. "RETURN TO ABSOLUTE ZERO."

Dr. Ezhno's body floated towards the Kruna Yura, its Ankh-driven metamorphosis and fusion with the Mother Computer now complete. The now gray-skinned body littered with scarring and mixed sections of organic and electronic parts had gained an armor plating around its upper torso and shoulders of metal and computer components, each shoulder pad resembling a four-pointed crown. Where a lower body once was now existed only a wispy tail. Both arms had snapped, warped, and fused with metal and its armored shoulders, leaving enormous, empty sockets where its dismembered, enlarged hands hovered out of.

As the new creation neared the Kruna, its skin acquired a purple tinge. The body stared at the seven elemental wielders with solid red eyes. One of its dismembered hands charged up shadow power and, no hesitation involved whatsoever, ripped a gash in its midsection, revealing a dark purple and black mass with a mouth. The Mother Computer Core was visible in the abdominal mouth of the conglomeration of the Mother Computer's body and Dr. Ezhno's corpse, and the segmented set of wings that the Mother Computer Core had ripped loose for its own use now hovered behind the corpse's back in a similar manner to its unattached hands. Despite everything, the Alkemei Ankh still clung to the corpse's neck. It shined the brightest it had all night.

"CHAOS PRECEDES ORDER," the corpse said without moving its mouth. "CHAOS IS LAW. THIS IS PERFECT CHAOS."

Chapter LIII

Chaotic Harbinger of Destruction: Gabriel Soul:

Chrissy trembled and shook as she watched from Heavenly Hall on her knees the monstrous undead-cybernetic-biomechanical amalgamation within Laboratory Zero-7 flare its wings and emit a ghoulish, warped roar. Electrical sparks, shadow wisps, and the Alkemei Ankh's essence all flickered, fluttered, traced, and paced along the surface of the fusion of Dr. Gabriel Ezhno's corpse with the Mother Computer. Much of the organic areas of its body now also gained an iridescent sheen as well. With all the damage and destruction Laboratory Zero-7, Heavenly Hall, and even MAE Command Center in general had endured so far, a massive collapse of both the building and the hill supporting everything was imminent.

"I can't stay here for this," murmured Chrissy, inching further away from the lab. "No, I'm not having any part of this..."

The seven Kruna Yura heard the floating monstrosity before them speak, or try to speak, rather; for whether from its transformation contorting and deforming its vocal chords, or as a result of some malfunction of the Mother Computer's voice, it spoke no clear, coherent sentence. Though it projected loud vocal tones, the Kruna could not decipher any of it. They could only recognize it as syllables strung together without structure. For all they knew, it could have been speaking an unknown language.

However unsure, Bowser and Warra both thought they recognized one particular grouping of distorted speech at the end of the long chain of ghastly, ghoulish noise. "... *WRETCHED FOOLS... BOW...* "

Gabriel Soul loomed as an imposing fiend on the fringe of life and death in a state unlike either. In the face of the gruesome reanimated vessel, the Kruna Yura prepared their elemental powers once more for another chapter in a saga that had lasted hours on end. With her injured ankle still handicapping her, Neva moved to the very rear of the group. Nova Daisy, Bowser, and Warra stepped

to the front, all appearing uneasy with the current situation, though maybe more because of the degraded condition of the lab. Even Daisy showed mild concern, though no one could fault her. They all remembered how the last time they faced a similar enemy went.

The sight of Gabriel Soul shook Ramona and gave her a nauseating feeling of dread. After the night they have had, the last thing she wanted – or even expected – was to face an undead creature boasting extensive power. *I am so done with this night!* Ramona cried in thought. *I just wanna go home! We should've just blasted this crummy computer apart the first chance we had!*

Gabriel Soul raised its hands and summoned dozens of portals that fired pink light lasers at the Kruna Yura. Several of the lasers grouped together and converged on common targets, almost all of whom cleanly dodged. Neva had Daisy dive in front of her and fling a wall of earth up as she flipped by, which served as an adequate defense while the room took yet another beating as a result of all the free-flying lasers that had missed their initial targets. The same attack came again, although this time with fewer portals but wider, more powerful light beams. As the others evaded, Daisy not only defended Neva but quick-formed a Crystal Fist that she then timed and swung to smash through the light beams heading their way.

"I guess the best defense can be a good offense," said Neva. "Or is it the other way around?"

"Depends on who you ask," said Daisy, trying to refortify her damaged Crystal Fist. "Even so, my crystals barely held up through that."

Ramona caught a few quick, deep breaths as she unlimbered and adjusted her Sun Shield in a way where she could attach it to her left shoulder like how Athelstan had mounted his own. She felt she needed the extra defense, but did not feel comfortable occupying one hand with a shield here. Right after she, Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, and Marut had all made some defensive adjustments, parts of the floor caved in along the lab's perimeter. Gabriel Soul's attacks had exacerbated the worsening condition of the room.

"Some more of that, and this whole place is coming down," said

Bowser.

"Feels like we've been saying that the whole time we've been in here," added Marut.

"We know who to blame," said Bowser, watching Gabriel Soul's power mount.

This battle looked to unfold as one eerily similar to the Osiris Soul fight in the future; only this time, the Kruna Yura did not have Andrew, or even Marissa, helping. They did, however, have the Alkemei Vranzer, the Pendant of Fate. Daisy tapped on her Vranzer several times and tried directing her power through it in an attempt to get it working, but she fared no better than she did on prior attempts.

Aw, come on! thought Daisy. *What good is this pendant supposed to be if it can't activate when I want it to? It can't counter the Ankh if it doesn't do anything!*

More terrified than she had been all night, Ramona felt her body quiver and tremble to an uncontrollable degree. She watched stone debris rise from the floor and loose portions of the ceiling tear lose, all pieces gravitating toward Gabriel Soul and melding together into several projectile-like shapes. Those rocky shapes then lit ablaze with intense flames and melted into lava, which Gabriel Soul then stabilized. The Mother Computer alone had demonstrated elemental control over all eight elements; but now combined with the Master Pendant and the vessel of Dr. Ezhno's corpse, there was no telling what limits Gabriel Soul had. As lightning flickered and jolted into existence with spinning dry ice icicles around each of Gabriel Soul's lava masses, Ramona grew even more fearful.

This creature is doing things I've never even seen natural wielders do! Ramona screamed in her head. *How do we fight something like this?! How can we beat something like this?! How?! How...*

And for a brief moment, Ramona's mind stopped paying attention to reality and instead directed her focus within...

Ramona's mind took her back to a weekend evening a couple of years ago, where she and Andrew sat together on the edge of a Christmas Village lake's boardwalk to watch the sunset, mere hours after getting through a clash with the most powerful elemental wielder they had encountered at the time, a wielder who had a personal vendetta against them. The elemental wielder had largely outclassed them both in nearly every way, but they still found a way to beat her.

"I still don't think I know how we both got out of there," Ramona said. "It feels like such a blur. I've never been so scared before. I just wanted us to run."

"If we ran, that would've just prolonged the inevitable," Andrew said. "She would've stalked us both again and beat us on her own time, and she would've had the added ego boost of thinking we're scared of her and can't ever beat her. Now that we've stood up to her, and won, we won't ever have to deal with her again."

"I don't get how you don't freak out when stuff like this happens, Andrew..." Ramona mumbled. "I mean, the kinds of things that she did... How can you think you can win against someone like that? How can you think that you can do something so difficult?"

I don't really think; I just believe , Andrew's voice echoed through Ramona's mind as she stared at Gabriel Soul. *You gotta have confidence, Ramona. You gotta stand up to the challenge and face it head on. If you don't try, you'll never know what you can really do. Even when the odds are a trillion to one, there's still a chance to succeed that you can't give up on. Sure, you might fail; but everybody fails sometimes. That's just how it goes. There's no certainty in anything except in making sure we do our best. If you don't have heart in what you do, you will fail every time.*

Gradually, Ramona's mood lifted out of dejected fear. Her morale built and reflected in the elemental power she called forth and surrounded the Solar Greatsword with that she now raised over her head. A spinning, low cyclone of spiky light flared around Ramona as well, which snagged everyone's attention.

Andrew, I try to remember that as often as I can , Ramona said in thought. *I see, it's how you stood up to Elkon, to King Boo, to Marissa, to everyone; and I have to make sure I do too. It's so difficult to keep that in the front of my mind, especially in situations like these. It's been so much harder with you not being here... But, wherever you are, I can still feel your presence. Though you may not be here, you're still with me. And I know that dead or alive, your heart is with me too.*

To the Kruna's utter surprise, they saw a shift in Ramona's energy. The golden waves acquired a dense collection of glimmering, shimmering sparkles and a smooth richness that appeared both hyper-dense and easily malleable. The changes were intriguingly similar to the shifts in Daisy's elemental energy whenever she enters her Nova Form.

"I can feel your spirit!" Ramona shouted. "And I will fight on just like you would have! It's what you would have done, and what you would have wanted me to do!"

Gabriel Soul held its position and waited, both its eyes and the gem of the Ankh focused on Ramona as a great transformation overtook her body. The light brown of her eyes brightened to an intense gold, coinciding with a bronzed sheen her skin gained. One thick, gold, obtuse-angled, v-shaped streak appeared along her eyes and ran under her hair to go around the circumference of her head. The glittery, sparkling, starry aspects Ramona's elemental power had acquired now amplified further. Ramona's hair then raised and spiked primarily up and out front in random directions, while her rearmost hair curled upwards into a rigid curve. Her morphed hair bore similarities to Nova Daisy's; but whereas Daisy's seemed reminiscent of an off-balance tree or leafy plant; Ramona's, when viewed from the side or rear, now largely resembled refracting light.

"Yo, what's going on with Ramona?" Marut asked. "Hey, no, wait, that's not..."

Bowser's face filled with awe. "Is this..."

Daisy watched Ramona intently, wondering what the sudden transformation was and what it meant. However, even more wonder

and bewilderment came moments later. Despite all that had changed around, on, and within Ramona, all of it reversed and undid itself. Even her light power reverted back to normal. Before long, it was as if nothing had happened to Ramona. Regardless, Ramona still stood with fierce resolve and continued building up her light power. The Kruna Yura of Light seemed unaware of her very temporary metamorphosis.

Perhaps out of impatience, Gabriel Soul then launched its many lightning-laced, dry ice-braced lava masses in all directions. The combination of elements that composed its projectiles offered no tangible chances to effectively counter, which meant the Kruna had to act in evasion again, and which also meant that the laboratory took another beating. Following the last of Gabriel Soul's attacks crashing into the walls and floors, the room began to wobble and shake.

"Athelstan!" Daisy yelled. "Move to the back with Neva! And support the room with your power!"

"I'll try!" Athelstan replied as he backpedaled. "But I don't think anything'll keep this place together if that thing is gonna keep churning out blasts like that!"

With Athelstan exerting his stone influence on the rocky ceiling, the paved concrete walls and floors, and the few metals in the room that MAE had not proofed against stone wielders, the Kruna had bought themselves some time to work with before the laboratory imploded. However, that left five elemental wielders available to combat Gabriel Soul, and two that needed defense. Gabriel Soul wasted no time in preparing another offensive move, now generating fire, shadow, light, ice, and air altogether into melded, mixed masses of layered elementals.

"This is a lot to have to focus on all at once!" shouted Athelstan, already straining with his concentration split across holding the entire room together. The task rose in difficulty as Gabriel Soul flung its four elemental masses of flaming ice encased around light and shadow power wrestling with one another. Gabriel Soul's bursts swept in curves through the gusting winds that backed them, and they exploded on contact like grenades with whatever they touched.

No square-inch of the lab came out from the attack unscathed. Likewise, the blasts blew all of the Kruna out into Heavenly Hall – all except Daisy, who got caught up in a corner of the room.

The other Kruna scrambled to their feet as Gabriel Soul floated out of the now collapsing Laboratory Zero-7 with the Ankh's energy escalating and surrounding its hands. No one saw Daisy anywhere, and they did not see her rush out of the imploding lab. Just seconds later, the entirety of Laboratory Zero-7 fell inward on itself as the ceiling filled up all the space within its room boundaries. Some of the rock and rubble even bounced out into Heavenly Hall behind Gabriel Soul, but no Nova Form Kruna Yura of Earth had appeared.

"No, Daisy!" Ramona cried.

"Crushed," Bowser said, wide-eyed. "That might be us soon, if we get unlucky like that."

Gabriel Soul crossed its hands and let the power gathering around its palms and wings surge to unprecedented heights. With a fierce flick of its hands out to its sides, the undead monstrosity ripped the relatively narrow Heavenly Hall wide open. The walls of Heavenly Hall tore loose from the foundation and rushed far out away from their opposite sides, tripling the amount of space available but pulverizing whatever was still in the other rooms in the process. Through a titanic thrust of its hands down, Gabriel Soul covered the entire floor with an alternating, slow-strobing side-scroll gradient of light and shadows. Whether or not the latter change was just aesthetic or had some special purpose remained to be seen.

"This freak's totally out of control!" shouted Neva.

"It looks like it's under some strict control, I think," said Athelstan.

"Are you sure?" Bowser said.

Gabriel Soul emitted a decibel-breaking, pained roar that made everyone cover their ears as it amassed even more power and called forth water, fire, air, stone, earth, and light to its body. Under the intense forces Gabriel Soul generated, the whole of Heavenly Hall rumbled and rattled. All of the shaking soon doubled, yet not

from anything Gabriel Soul did. It appeared as though the second surge of tremors came from *behind* Gabriel Soul, where there used to be a Laboratory Zero-7. A harsh, earth-shaking, gratingly raspy scream later, seismic energy roared forth and blasted copious kilos of debris out of the destroyed lab into Heavenly Hall. A majority of the debris crashed into Gabriel Soul as Daisy exploded back onto the scene with a glittering, sparkling Nova-enhanced aura of silver earth power surrounding her heavily-battered body. While Gabriel Soul recoiled, Daisy launched herself at the undead creature and smashed a phenomenally strong, attack-disrupting kick into it.

As Daisy landed out of her jump, an onslaught came from behind her. Bowser in his Whirling Fortress move tackled Gabriel Soul, which Marut followed up with a Drill Dash that Neva surrounded with ice shots from her rifle and Warra subsequently backed with an electrocuted Tidal Wall. Pushed back into the wall behind it, Gabriel Soul then suffered under the crushing force that Athelstan brought through a jumping, stone-encased, Odina-powered swing of his Mountain Hammer. The Kruna Yura's combined vicious assault inflicted a considerable amount of damage on Gabriel Soul, even deforming some of the creature. Before it could move, Gabriel Soul endured yet another heavy attack, this one in the form of a Volt Fusion light burst from Ramona that held a ludicrous amount of power and burned an electrified hole clear through the decayed flesh making up the unarmored portion of Gabriel Soul's chest. In a sudden, abrupt jolt, the subsequent magnetic discharge repelled Gabriel Soul back and up against the ceiling and mangled wall behind it.

Bowser smiled. "Alright, good to know our Volt Fusion tools can still do extra damage to that thing."

Daisy pointed at Gabriel Soul. "But look."

Unfortunately for the Kruna, the Alkemei Ankh activated soon after Ramona's attack. One of the Ankh's many effects worked its magic on the severe burn from the Kruna Yura of Light, sealing it off and regenerating much of the damage. The Ankh then did what it could to heal much of the harm the Kruna had inflicted on Gabriel Soul, greatly reducing the net damage the undead body had sustained.

"We'll need to attack quick and stack moves," said Warra.

"Or attack with something to obliterate it so that it can't regenerate," said Neva.

"Anyone have a move strong enough to do that?" asked Athelstan.

"Andrew," said Marut.

"Anyone else?" asked Athelstan.

"I bet I could do something with some plasma," Bowser said.

"I *might* have something in mind *,* " said Daisy. "But I'll need your help, Bowser. And yours too, Neva and Ramona."

Bowser raised a fist and ignited super-hot fire around it. "I'll try some plasma first."

Daisy called forth earth and converted it to crystal as Bowser's extreme thermal energy birthed the plasma he intended to attack with. "Then in the meantime..."

While the Kruna had prepared their next set of moves, the Alkemei Ankh prepared something of its own. The Ankh projected an intense glow and catalyzed another metamorphosis. Under the Ankh's influence, Gabriel Soul's organic body broke down further. Showing complete, egregious disregard for both the former corpse of Dr. Ezhno and the complex durability of life's creation, the Ankh's power ripped apart what remained of Gabriel Soul's organic limbs and tore open a gaping gash in its torso much larger than what was already there. All of the inorganic components of Gabriel Soul then warped and stretched; dismantling and reforming, shifting and reorganizing, degrading and refusing, all culminating together to build a new, more grotesque shape.

The Mother Computer Core existed within the large cavity in the torso of the remnants of Dr. Ezhno's body. The figure of a shadowed man outlined the mangled corpse, emitting pink, light blue, and red light, with a gleaming pink halo above its head and two sets – one large pair and one small pair – of segmented wings now made up of metal fragments, computer pieces, and even some bone. Several

chains of mechanical parts also hung off of the body. A single, bright, glowing eye sat where the left eye socket would have been on a physical equivalent of the shadowed, man-like silhouette. Its crown-shaped shoulder armor contorted into a more curved, angular form, while its dismembered hands now had a mixed composition of decaying tissue and technology.

Neva groaned. "Now what?!"

"A transformation," said Daisy. The teal-silver Crystal Fist she had crafted around her left hand hardened into a far more dense mass and gained orange shades as she upgraded it into the Final Crystal Fist.

"Is that oil running down its body?" asked Athelstan. Continuous streaks of dark reddish-brown fluid leaked off of Gabriel Soul's hands and the bottom of its torso.

"I *hope* it's oil," said Marut.

"Me too," Daisy said, breaking into a speedy sprint the next instant. Each step echoed and splattered the light and darkness that Gabriel Soul had covered the floor with. Somehow, Gabriel Soul had manipulated the light and dark into a stable layered mixture with a purpose that had seemed unclear until just before Daisy reached the undead body. When Daisy brought her Final Crystal Fist up to strike, Gabriel Soul plummeted straight into the melded floor and disappeared. Gabriel Soul reappeared moments later on the far left side of the expanded Heavenly Hall as Daisy whiffed her hooking punch.

"Hey, what the..." Daisy mumbled, whipping her body around to face the undead being.

"Daisy, watch out! The floor!" Ramona shouted. "That monster's combined light and shadow to warp through space, like Andrew and I did!"

Gabriel Soul spawned a popping green fireball in its palms and thrust both hands down into the light-shadow floor. Its hands reached in front of Daisy the very next instant. The Fanning Torch

that Gabriel Soul had created sprayed out immediately as a result of the point-blank range, coating Daisy in a fan of fire. She threw her arms up and got her Final Crystal Fist in the way to block some of the heat, but she could not block all of it. Warra and Neva both sent their elements flying at Daisy in a hurry to counteract the Fanning Torch before the green flames burned into Daisy too much. In a swift reaction, Daisy slammed her Final Crystal Fist onto the hands of Gabriel Soul just before they could slip back under the portal floor; an attack that, on contact, mangled the left hand's fingers and launched the hands back under the portal to reappear and crash into Gabriel Soul as if they were projectiles.

"Thanks, guys; I wasn't expecting that one," Daisy said, her Final Crystal Fist breaking down.

"A huge portal, and Bowser's Fanning Torch," said Athelstan. "That must mean it still has access to the Universal Database, and can still copy techniques!"

"Or, it *is* the Universal Database now," said Warra.

"Hey, why ain't *we* falling through this floor?" asked Marut.

"It must still be exerting influence on it, to lock us out," said Ramona.

"Which means it can appear wherever, and we're at a big disadvantage," said Warra.

Projecting another roar, Gabriel Soul elevated its hands and generated streaks of lightning that curled down and tracked all along the altered floor. Lightning soon emerged from the floor in random locations throughout Heavenly Hall, catching and zapping Athelstan and Neva. Some of the other Kruna noticed the trick and went on the move, but the randomness of the lightning led Warra into shocks. Marut simply went airborne, while Ramona dashed to Bowser and erected a light shield around them both so that Bowser could keep his focus on his plasma creation. Almost struck herself, Daisy catapulted to a wall and stabbed her Crystal Grip into it. From her wall hang, Daisy watched lightning shoot out of the floor and clang with the spherical light shield Ramona had formed.

Before Athelstan, Neva, or Warra suffered another shock, Marut threw out his Gust Boomerangs with a slight electrical charge to them. As the boomerangs flew around the room, they drew out all the lightning Gabriel Soul sent through the floor and absorbed it into their forms. Once Marut caught the now highly-charged boomerangs, he slung both one after the other at Gabriel Soul. On contact, each Gust Boomerang let all the gathered lightning explode out at the undead creature.

Ramona dropped her light shield. "Great, Marut! That stopped its attack!"

"You gonna do something with that plasma?!" Daisy shouted.

"Now I can," said Bowser. "This'll nick a large portion of my remaining power; but if it's successful, it'll be worth it."

" *I WILL LIVE FOREVER...* " the voice from Gabriel Soul echoed as the last of the lightning dissipated from its body.

"Wanna BET?!" Bowser yelled, firing his plasma burst.

Strangely, Gabriel Soul made no effort to spare itself from the plasma. Bowser's blast hit Gabriel Soul dead on and pierced through its torso with ease, but the undead creature's reaction was minimal. Despite the incredibly severe burn it had suffered, Gabriel Soul hovered as if nothing had penetrated it. Instead of seeing Gabriel Soul in pain or hampered in some kind of way, the Kruna saw the undead creature generate a Shadow Ripper in its left hand and a Crystal Fist in the other hand.

" *THE SINGULARITY...* " the Kruna heard next from Gabriel Soul.

As the other Kruna recovered, Gabriel Soul augmented its Shadow Ripper with swirling bands of icicles. Gabriel Soul then encased its Crystal Fist in a mixture of light and fire that amplified exponentially in seconds before water and ice then doused it and revealed a Diamond Fist in place of the original creation. With a slow spin, Gabriel Soul drifted into the portal-covered floor.

"Everyone, move!" Bowser screamed. Aside from Daisy and Marut,

who were not standing on the floor, the Kruna all sidestepped as quickly as they each could. However, Gabriel Soul did not aim for them. The Ankh-controlled corpse rose from the ground directly under where Daisy clung to the wall. Caught by surprise, Daisy detached her grip just an instant too late and met a walloping Diamond Fist uppercut that crunched her into the rocky ceiling. The force behind the Diamond Fist made the portion of the ceiling it connected with implode and collapse, dropping Daisy along with its debris.

Gabriel Soul whipped its body around and rocketed with its Shadow Ripper in the lead now at Marut, who rolled out of the air and back to the ground. That left nothing but more of the ceiling for Gabriel Soul to crash its attack into and blast away, furthering Heavenly Hall's destruction. With two colossal chunks of the ceiling blasted away, Heavenly Hall's already compromised structural integrity worsened. One wrong move, and the whole corridor would crumble and flatten everyone within.

" *THE ABSOLUTE...* " the voice from Gabriel Soul hummed.

"Daisy! Get up!" Ramona yelled. "Come on!"

Though still maintaining Nova Form, Daisy found herself in obvious difficulty. She could not move without intense pain rushing through the entirety of her midsection. Every breath she took stung with agonizing discomfort, and she felt fluid build up in her chest and deep in her abdomen. On sheer will power alone, she rocked herself out of the rubble and onto her hands and knees. Grimacing and groaning, she could not push herself any further.

"Aw man, she looks bad!" said Marut.

"From one hit?" Athelstan said. "She endured more than that before..."

"No earth wielder durability will lessen a hit from diamond, I'm sure," said Warra. "That one hit must've injured something inside."

"Somebody get her a Mushroom!" said Bowser. "At the very least, it'll get her to stand up!"

As Ramona ran to Daisy, Gabriel Soul began generating more power and elementals. The Ankh flashed and worked its healing abilities on Gabriel Soul to lessen the severity of the damage from Bowser's plasma. Again, the Kruna heard the voice from Gabriel Soul speak, this time simply declaring, " *I AM GOD...* "

Chapter LIV

Persistence of the Soul:

The floor of light and shadow covering Heavenly Hall bubbled and oozed as Gabriel Soul prepared its next offensive. While the other Kruna Yura also readied themselves, Ramona ran to Daisy and tried to help her off of her hands and knees. It seemed as though the movement alone was too much for the ailing Nova Form earth wielder following the critical hit Gabriel Soul had punished her with, so Ramona held her there and gave her a Mushroom. Seeing as how that one Mushroom alone did not help, Ramona gave Daisy a second and a third.

We have to end this fast, before that monster can hurt anyone else, thought Ramona, staring at Daisy now gingerly rising. She then glanced at the almost empty pouch used to hold their recovery items. *We're really running low on these...*

"I can't believe the amount of power that it's generating," said Athelstan, mouth agape as he gazed at Gabriel Soul.

"Someone think of something, quick!" Bowser demanded.

Daisy grimaced as she hunched over and gripped her drill staff in front of her, breathing with excruciating difficulty. "I don't think...any of you guys...want to get hit with that kind of punch..."

"It looks like we won't, at least," said Neva. "It's doing something else now..."

Its Diamond Fist and Shadow Ripper gone, Gabriel Soul now swirled tendrils of fire, water, earth, stone, air, and ice in six individual loops around its body. Each partition of elemental power continued to grow in size and intensity with each passing moment. Meanwhile, the other Kruna – aside from Daisy and Ramona – reached a peak in elemental charge in their Volt Fusion tools.

"Look at that," murmured Athelstan. "It's like staring at a carbon

atom."

"A demented, creepy, nightmare atom, sure," muttered Ramona.

Gabriel Soul turned its body to line up with Daisy and Ramona, then began spinning in place. It flew towards the Heavenly Hall ceiling with its six-element barrier funneling around its body as it spiraled into a dive towards the two Kruna. No doubt it had sensed Daisy's weakened state and aimed to take her out quickly. Ramona stood in front of Daisy with both swords up and her shoulder-mounted Sun Shield ready to try and defend against Gabriel Soul the best she could.

"Ramona, no!" Daisy snapped, moving up to push her out of the way.

Ramona shrugged Daisy off. "I will protect you, I swear!"

Instead, Bowser skidded in front of the two and smacked his flaming, electromagnetically-charged Flare Sword up into Gabriel Soul. Bowser's power exploded with aggression on contact, but only succeeded in stalling the Ankh-controlled undead creature. Gabriel Soul and its elements continued rapidly revolving in an attempt to overpower Bowser, who clenched both hands around his sword and tried to match each uptick in force Gabriel Soul emitted. Soon, Bowser's power began teetering and crumbling under Gabriel Soul's increasing might.

But as Bowser faded, Warra ran next to him and smashed his charged trident into Gabriel Soul too. Elementals sprayed off in all directions from the contact points between the two Kruna and the spinning morphed corpse. Marut then swung down in an agile aerial arc and bashed his saber into Gabriel Soul as well, bringing the resistance against Gabriel Soul up to three Kruna. And yet still, Gabriel Soul's spinning did not slow, nor did the elemental barrier around its body weaken.

The three Kruna engaged found themselves trying to muscle through and overpower a force that seemed like something way too immense to handle. Athelstan entered the struggle next, an Odina-doubled, rocky hammer swing not only buffing the combined

strength the three Kruna held against Gabriel Soul but also completely blowing it all up. Athelstan's attack added an incredible amount of instability to the clash, resulting in an explosion that blasted away everyone aside from Neva but including Gabriel Soul.

While all the other six Kruna hit the floor, Gabriel Soul merely ricocheted off the ceiling and wall and reestablished a controlled, smooth hover. Power leapt from the corpse's form out of every cavity and indentation, circulating around into a multi-elemental aura this time composed of everything except fire. The many waves, bands, and sections of Gabriel Soul's combined aura escalated in intensity and received a boost from the Alkemei Ankh's influence. Just as the six Kruna that were knocked over started to get up, Gabriel Soul emitted a shockwave out of its aura that struck them all back down once more.

As she watched her friends hit the deck again from the other side of Heavenly Hall, Neva tried to hold back the terrified feelings swelling up in her and the throbbing painful sensations pulsing within her to come up with a retaliation. But the longer she watched, the more aware she grew that she was running empty on power herself. And with inadequate power and a heavily-injured ankle slowing her down, Neva felt unsure of how effective she could be even if she tried. She had to come up with something quick however, for the other Kruna were taking far too long to recover. Gabriel Soul's power continued expanding at an astounding rate, which, this deep into a fight after all that it had expended already, showed a depth comparable to only an elite few whom the Kruna Yura had faced before.

C'mon, Neva, thought Neva herself. *Think of something, fast! The way things are now, I can't do anything to slow that monster down. But if I don't do something, then this'll get* really *ugly! It's already gotten way out of hand. How can the Ankh combine with a computer and some super nerd to do this?!*

None of the six downed Kruna could manage even getting to a knee by the time Gabriel Soul's accumulated power had grown into a luminous cage of elements around its body. Before long, Heavenly Hall looked as though it had a miniature star hovering within it, for the light shining through its elemental cage brought the hidden

Command Center sector brightness reminiscent of a sunny afternoon. As far as what Gabriel Soul specifically had in mind of doing with its power, no one could tell.

"Crap, am I even gonna make that guy budge with this?" Neva wondered aloud, aiming her rifle's laser sight on Gabriel Soul.

Considering the elements now in flux around Gabriel Soul, an attack from her might not even reach the undead creature. Still, she aimed and charged her rifle with ice bullets that then received the Volt Fusion enhancement. While Neva targeted Gabriel Soul, Daisy whipped to her feet and turned to face their enemy. The Nova Form earth wielder's body shook under the pressure of internal pain aching throughout her abdomen and up into her chest, every breath taking its toll on her. Once she saw Neva's laser sight trying to reach through the elemental chaos surrounding Gabriel Soul, Daisy hastily turned her attention to her ice teammate.

"No way any of your shots are getting through to him, Neva," Daisy said.

"Oh yeah?" Neva said, frowning. "Watch me. I see gaps I can exploit."

"No, Neva," Daisy said. "Turn that sight off and look at what's going on. What's actually going on."

Neva turned off her sniper's laser and watched Gabriel Soul. Its elements now condensed and compressed, Gabriel Soul's dark yet shining body drew its cage of elements inward to encase itself. Interestingly, Gabriel Soul also sucked in every last bit of discarded debris throughout Heavenly Hall as well. Fire soon finally ignited, completing the eight-pronged assortment of elements. Gabriel Soul even drew in all of the light and shadow power making up the floor portal it had spread all across Heavenly Hall.

One after another, the other Kruna stood. Bowser and Athelstan first, then Warra, Ramona, and Marut; all seven of the Kruna Yura had recovered and got to their feet, at least for the time being. None of them appeared to be in good shape. And now, Warra felt something wrong in his hip. The Kruna Yura of Water leaned his

weight onto his right side as he stood and awaited the next move from Gabriel Soul. From what the Kruna could tell, none of them could pull off an effective attack with the current elemental wall encircling Gabriel Soul. Not only did Gabriel Soul's power keep growing as time passed, but the conglomeration of elements around it continued compressing and compacting. The elemental mass also gained a spherical shape as well, as it encased every part of Gabriel Soul within it. What once loosely resembled an astral star now appeared locked inside of a scaled-down planet, a planet rumbling, jostling, morphing, and thriving with life.

"Whoa, what's going on?" murmured Marut.

Now floating before the Kruna was an active mass of matter and energy, glowing golden with light and fire as shadows revolved around the surface in a wave, covered in vast regions of earth and stone, split with multiple sections of water and ice, trees and plant life even sprouting up on much of the land; and all of this a part of a singular, circular three-dimensional mass no larger than four times Bowser's size. It hovered and rotated there in Heavenly Hall as if it had been there for eons.

"I don't believe it," said Athelstan. "It's like, looking at Earth from space. A different Earth..."

"But why?" asked Bowser.

"Man, what I wouldn't give to copy *that* right about now," grumbled Neva.

"For what?" asked Marut.

"To fling it right back at it," said Neva. "What else? For decoration?"

Daisy gasped, her expression wide awake with realization. "I get it! It's telling us something!"

"Yeah, I think I'm starting to get it to," said Bowser.

Warra nodded. "I as well."

"Get what?" asked Marut.

"The elements, the Ankh..." Bowser replied. "They're all linked together somehow..."

"I can feel something," said Daisy. "Something not from this world. Not from the present day..."

"I feel as though we're looking at something out of the past," said Warra. "But how far back, I don't know..."

"Way before Osiris *or* the Shadow Queen," said Daisy. "How is this happening?..."

"I'm willing to bet this is only possible because of the Ankh," said Bowser. "Whatever this is and whatever this all means, I can't tell if it's good or bad."

"Maybe it's neither," said Ramona.

"But what's the point of this?!" grunted Bowser.

As the planet-like mass revolved in its spot in space, its surface continued morphing. Landmasses ripped apart and drifted across the waters, fire and frost clashed in its atmosphere, and light and darkness spun around the spheroid in perfect unison to one another across opposite sides of the surface. Much of its land grew more lush and green. Several climates and landscapes developed on Gabriel Soul's floating creation.

"It looks...so beautiful," murmured Ramona.

"I can still sense its energy increasing," said Marut.

"Is this an attack?" mumbled Warra.

"It...seems overly elaborate for one," said Bowser. "And yet, this is the most power it has generated all night. Easily."

Hey, wait, now here's an idea, thought Neva, grasping her Null Alkemei Hien. *My Hien can't seem to copy attacks anymore, and it certainly couldn't copy any coming from any machines* ... But, *as some kind of mechanical-organic mishmash hybrid, if this monster's just natural enough, just organic enough, then maybe I can at least*

copy its energy! Like I did earlier with that Blackguard freak! I should certainly have enough to blast through that shell it built around itself.

"Should we attack?" asked Athelstan. "We could be making a mistake just standing around and watching this."

Neva's Null Alkemei Hien flashed and lit up as she focused on Gabriel Soul. Energy surged into her body and multiplied at an exponential rate. Though Gabriel Soul's power continued rising, so did Neva's – at a much higher rate. A dense fog of frost and haze hissed around Neva, soon expanding into an icy aura of greater depth and magnitude than any prior power-up she had executed in the past. The other Kruna turned their attention to Neva, astonished at the sudden uptick in power from her. The immediate space around Neva transformed into a scaled-down blizzard, even freezing some of the ground she stood on in the process.

"That answers that question, bro," Marut said to Athelstan.

Ramona shuddered. "She's making the temperature in here plummet fast..."

Marut glanced at Daisy. "Hey! Why don't we ask Chrissy what's going on? That's her computer thing that's stuck in that guy."

"I doubt she knows about this, considering how much was already unfamiliar to her," said Bowser. His expression suddenly lit up in shock. "WAIT..."

"Uh...where is she?" said Athelstan, looking all through the distorted Heavenly Hall. The other Kruna scouted out the area as well, none of them spotting the head MAE Learner.

"Gone..." Bowser said, alarmed. "I can't see her anywhere here... She escaped!"

"When?!" asked Daisy.

"I don't know!" Bowser said. "I couldn't focus on my three-sixty sight! I was too worried about *this* monstrosity!"

"That last part goes for all of us," said Warra.

"Figures she'd try to dip," said Marut.

"We can't worry about her right now," said Warra. "We have to outlast what's in front of us...whatever it's doing..."

"Let's hope Neva has an answer to it," said Bowser.

Gabriel Soul's planetary shell developed further, all while Neva's icy build-up amplified at rates never before seen. Frost and snow cover expanded outward from Neva as she raised her rifle high and did her best to keep her accumulating power as dense and close to her as she could. She wanted all that she could generate focused together into one single attack. From what the other Kruna could sense, Neva's power started catching up to Gabriel Soul's. But more than once, Neva's body violently jolted and twitched.

"That doesn't look good," said Marut.

"I've seen that before," said Bowser. "That's the look of someone receiving a sudden boost in power that's more than their body can handle all at once. She better be careful, or else she'll hurt herself."

"And that's the Hien doing that..." said Athelstan. "Wow...and we were certain Kokoro had trashed it."

Daisy nodded, solemn in the face. "That may be the Hien's work, but it's up to Neva to control that power and make sure it doesn't tear her body apart."

Warra made a slight grimace. "And if she keeps gaining power like this, that outcome's probability will keep going up as well."

Gabriel Soul's power finally slowed its steady increase; but that was only a precursor to something else. The scaled-down planet containing Gabriel Soul expanded and cracked with an audible series of pops and rips. Fire and lava soon oozed out of all the fissures. Streaks of light and shadow flickered out erratically from new cracks that developed in the surface. Sounds of destruction filled Heavenly Hall, noises akin to a cataclysmic geological event. All the order once established on Gabriel Soul's planetary shell devolved and broke down into discord, for the shell's surface gave

way and split apart into unstable chunks. Everything within poured out and smothered the surface, eradicating all the life it harbored.

The Null Alkemei Hien's ability had brought Neva's energy signature to a staggering new height, not too far off from the energy signature Gabriel Soul radiated. She took aim with her rifle and got set to unleash it all at Gabriel Soul, but the strain proved to be too much. Her trembling body could not steady her tool, and the pain and pressure now taking over messed with her focus. The ambient lightning in Heavenly Hall dimmed and warmed to a dark red hue as the planet surrounding Gabriel Soul turned into a popping, crackling, exploding, rupturing glowing ball of elementals in conflict with one another. The more chaos that broke loose on the planet-like barrier's surface, the more the Kruna could hear fiendish, ghoulish moaning and hissing.

"Neva, if you're going to attack, you need to do it soon!" Bowser yelled. "Like, in the next ten seconds!"

Neva had audible strain in her voice when she responded. "Why so quick?!"

"I'd hate to find out what happens if you take too long!" Bowser replied.

"I can't...get my gun centered," Neva groaned. "I'm trying! But I can't!"

Daisy dashed at Neva and got behind her. She felt the residual icy chill from Neva's built-up power surround her as she hugged and braced Neva against her own body. Getting a sturdy grasp on Neva's arms, Daisy held the Kruna of Ice's aim steady and kept much of the jitters and convulsions in her body suppressed.

"Daisy, wait, to the right!" grunted Neva. "More right!"

As Daisy helped Neva adjust, Gabriel Soul's planetary shell tremored with shockwaves. Several sections of the floor ripped loose and rose, though more as a secondary effect than through any direct elemental manipulation on Gabriel Soul's part. The crust of the planet-like object surrounding Gabriel Soul crunched and

snapped apart even more, random pieces either floating outward or imploding. At no point did Gabriel Soul's body become visible when a substantial amount of its planetary barrier's surface broke down. Instead, everything drew inwards and condensed at accelerating speeds. Elemental wrath and fury ripped around the hovering mass that now sucked in the loose debris floating about; and as the last of its surface dismantled and quaked off, sections of the walls and ceiling tore free into the suction as well. The Kruna nearest to the event backpedaled as far from the event as the space in the hall would allow.

"Neva, blast it already!" yelled Daisy. "GO!"

A slight bout of hesitation transpired before Neva let out a bellowing cry and pumped a gargantuan white cannon out of her rifle, all the energy and force discharging pushing back the two Kruna. Daisy used all her strength to keep her and Neva stable and upright against the vicious recoil the Null Hien-amplified ice beam generated. As Daisy slowed their backwards skid to a stop, the colossal column of electromagnetically-intertwined ice rushed its way at the melting down planet-esque barrier surrounding Gabriel Soul. Moments before Neva's attack struck home, the entire remainder of the barrier crumbled away and gave way to a pulsating, red-hot revelation. With Gabriel Soul itself now visible again, the Kruna could now see the new mass making up over half of its body. So when Neva's mighty ice blast hit, it sizzled and sublimated against the gurgling ruby star turning Heavenly Hall crimson.

The Kruna saw a head, an eye, a pair of wings, a pair of hands, and the Alkemei Ankh, all dismembered and hovering around the compact red dwarf Neva tried to overpower. Neva's efforts prevented Gabriel Soul from expanding its red dwarf body, but she needed to do more than that. As the situation stood then and there, only she and her great cannon of ice could counter the star's power. The more Neva pumped out, the less she felt overwhelming her body. Maintaining her attack became easier – to an extent – as time passed, the excessive pressure and strain of holding the magnitude of power that her Null Hien had copied lessening. Cosmic sounds previously unheard of bounced around Heavenly Hall as Neva

ground away at Gabriel Soul's red dwarf, a mass still achieving modest increases in power despite her attack holding it in check.

With the figurative and literal support Daisy gave her, Neva pressed onward as more of Heavenly Hall crumbled and drew into Gabriel Soul's red dwarf. All hope of survival, let alone winning, rested in Neva's hands; for the amount of power Gabriel Soul had demonstrated in manufacturing its red dwarf dwarfed that of each of the Kruna. And yet, Neva's Null Hien brought her up – at least, temporarily – to a level close to Gabriel Soul's. The dimming of the undead creature's red dwarf body proved to be a good sign, for Neva found herself with some leverage on it as her attack gradually cooled the star's temperature. Gabriel Soul made multiple attempts to expand its red dwarf, but Neva had gained too much momentum for it to hold up for much longer. The Alkemei Ankh appeared to flash in response, as if it recognized that the vessel it controlled could not resist the continuous assault it faced anymore.

"Wait, is she actually overpowering that?!" said Athelstan.

"C'mon, Neva!" cheered Ramona. "More! Just a little more!"

"Do it!" shouted Bowser.

Portions of Gabriel Soul's red dwarf began spewing off in outward halos, each interval coinciding with a noticeable drop in the gravitational suction the star produced. As Neva blasted away more of Gabriel Soul's star, its structure grew more unstable and hemorrhaged. Gabriel Soul was locked into place and could not divert its body away from the charged ice boring into it. The extra energy Neva's Null Hien had granted her now faded at a swift pace, but the power Gabriel Soul had channeled into its red dwarf dropped just as fast. In fact, the decrease on Gabriel Soul's end accelerated as its star sustained more damage.

"Go, Neva!" Warra yelled.

"Waste him!" hollered Marut.

"Let whatever's left out now!" Daisy shouted. "All of it, all at once! I've got you!"

Neva gave a nod and siphoned all that the Null Hien had replicated for her through her rifle and out its nozzle at the diminishing red dwarf, a mammoth second surge stabbing through the air her cannon ravaged along. The loudest glassy echo of smashing ice any of the Kruna Yura had ever heard reverberated once Neva's full frosty fury obliterated Gabriel Soul's weakened red dwarf, which then left Gabriel Soul itself defenseless against the sizable portion of the ice that was still left over and on its way. As now just a collection of pieces without a torso, Gabriel Soul could do little to protect itself – it also could not muster anything to resist the last of Neva's blast either.

Gabriel Soul, and the Ankh along with it, succumbed to the final rush of ice, electricity, and magnetics Neva unleashed. Her great cannon launched all of Gabriel Soul back into the walls behind it and carved extensive chunks of the walls and ceiling out in frosty explosions laced with magnetic and electric charge that scattered polarized ice throughout Heavenly Hall. Hidden in the chilled chaos, horrific, demonic moans rattled the snow and ice shards that fluttered to the floor. And as the sounds of icy upheaval and further structural damage to Heavenly Hall silenced, so too did the moans.

Chapter LV

The Cyber Soul Will Not Cease:

Nova Daisy kept holding onto Neva, who had trouble catching her breath following the devastating attack she had just tore through Gabriel Soul with. Thick, frosty haze hovered around the area of Heavenly Hall where Neva had blasted Gabriel Soul, ice and ceiling debris still raining down. Despite having next to nothing left in her, Neva kept her Freeze Coil Sniper up and pointed at the center of the dense haze.

"So is that it?" asked Marut, cautiously staring into the haze covering the whole back sector of Heavenly Hall. "That thing's destroyed now, right?"

"As far as we can tell, it should be," said Bowser. "It had transformed its body into a star, which Neva then somehow shattered. And with some power to spare, at that. That sounds about as destroyed as it can get, short of vaporization."

Wide-eyed and red all over, Neva trembled and seizured a little. Using her Null Alkemei Hien to copy the power that Gabriel Soul had generated in its last maneuver had more than taken its toll on her already harmed and pained body. If not for Daisy standing behind her and supporting her, Neva likely would have wobbled and collapsed. As more of the haze settled, the Kruna Yura saw the extent of the damage Neva's colossal cannon of ice had done; for at the other end of where Neva had fired her continuous shot now lay a tunnel several feet in diameter and covered in icicles. All the rock and earth within the tunnel had a thick, glossy sheen of ice frozen over it. Given the darkness within the tunnel, no one knew how far back it went. Daisy's enhanced vision in the dark could not even make out any sort of end to the tunnel. For all they knew, Neva could have bored deep into the hilly mountain MAE Command Center was built into.

"Um...so, uh..." mumbled Marut, nervously staring at Neva. "Just

how did you do that, again?"

"My pendant..." said Neva, still panting. "I don't think...I can handle doing that a second time... Not to that level... I thought I was gonna explode..."

"With the kind of night you've had, Neva, I'd say you deserve a vacation," Bowser remarked.

"I don't think she needs to do something like that another time," said Athelstan. "With the way that ice came barreling out, she might have snapped everything about that fiend up into chilled pieces."

"Yes, but what does that mean for the Ankh?" said Warra.

Marut tapped on his head in wonder. "If the Ankh gets destroyed, does that mean Osiris gets set free, or Osiris gets destroyed with the Ankh?"

"I'm almost certain that the Ankh can't be destroyed," said Daisy. "Given all that it has survived up to this point, it'd probably have to take something extreme to destroy it. Like, sending it shooting into a star. But then, Gabriel Soul had transformed part of itself into a star, and the Ankh survived that..."

"Remember, that's no common Alkemei," said Bowser. "That's the Master Pendant. There's a reason they only made one of those; and given the original intent it once had, I'm sure they wanted it as indestructible as possible."

"Alright, then let's go after it and secure it," said Athelstan.

"Yeah...so we can get out of here already," said Neva.

"Finally!" said Marut. "We just wrecked a whole organization and saved elemental wielding across the world! And we got rid of some super-dangerous, wacko ultra computer! We are gonna get so much clout for this! We getting toy deals, we getting clothing lines, we getting TV shows, video games, movies; we'll have stories and fan fiction overloading our fan sites, we'll have-"

"Why fan fiction?" asked Athelstan.

"You know you've made it big when you've got other people writing fan fiction about you!" Marut exclaimed. "That's where you get the real hardcore fans!"

"People doing that just sounds creepy, if you ask me," said Daisy.

"Whoa, let's slow down there," said Bowser. "We gotta expose all of this to the public first to make sure we regain a positive reputation. MAE's propaganda has put us in question."

"I'm not worried about that," said Daisy. "MAE failed. I doubt their extremist ideology will have any staying power with anyone."

"I hope so..." said Bowser. "Daisy, how about searching that dark hole for the Ankh?"

"Hold on, guys," said Ramona. "I don't feel like we actually won anything..."

"Neither do I," murmured Warra.

"Whatcha mean?" asked Daisy. She suddenly perked up the instant after saying that. "No, wait...you're right, something feels off."

"You mean this isn't over after all?!" Neva cried. "I'm so DONE with tonight!"

None of the others said anything extra. All focus drifted solely onto the impressive cave Neva's ice had carved out, its depth unknown and its contents in question. Within was either a dismembered and destroyed Gabriel Soul with an equally demolished Ankh, a defeated Gabriel Soul but a fully functioning and whole Ankh, or both Gabriel Soul and the Ankh in decent condition. Waiting for something to come out of the gash in the wall seemed about as risky as searching through it themselves.

"Here's what I say," stated Daisy, bringing forth some Nova-enhanced earth energy. "If you have a bad feeling about something, then something is probably wrong."

Bowser grimaced. "If it survived that, then what can any of us do that it won't survive?"

Staring with brooding eyes into the dark void now housing the eerie uncertainty over the fate of the Kruna Yura's night, Daisy maintained a steady flow of seismic power around her and straightened her posture. Now standing completely upright, she raised her left arm. Her hand went to the straps of her wrist weight; and soon after, the weight slid across the left side of the room with an audible crashing ding and a dragging crunch. The same noise echoed again as the weight once on her right wrist went on an identical path to the right of the room, then twice more when the weights around her ankles followed suit. Up to this point, no one had ever seen her strip those four weights off mid-battle.

"Wait, you're really abandoning those?" asked Athelstan.

Daisy nodded. "They brought me closer to earth and grounded me, making elemental wielding easier for me without actually being a tool when I couldn't use a tool. But now that I can use a proper elemental tool, and Nova Form too, there's no need for them anymore. They're only holding me back."

Unnoticed to the others, Daisy had also been trying to access her Alkemei Vranzer. But as has been the case with every prior attempt, she failed to activate it or elicit any effect. Doubt crept further into her mind over the Vranzer's efficacy, but memory of what Arka Knight had told her about it potentially being the answer to offsetting Osiris and the Ankh restored her faith. Whatever was going on with the Vranzer, either she could not use it on command or could not use it in the current situation. That rang true from the moment she had acquired the item.

If there was ever a time for this pendant to do something, now would be it , thought Daisy.

The deafening noise of ambient silence could drive a person mad, but it soon ended. A low, fuming hum replaced it. Then a dark, rippling pink-purple glow floated out from within the darkness of the tunnel ahead of the Kruna. Their battle had not concluded.

"Here it comes..." Warra mumbled.

Ramona and Bowser in turn both brought forth the remainder of their

individual power and waited as the iced, gored mass of meat, metal, and cybernetics floated out of the tunnel and rejoined them in Heavenly Hall. Still draped around Gabriel Soul's disfigured neck, the Ankh churned out more of its power. Judging by the erratic, rapid beating of the Ankh's glow and Gabriel Soul's twitching spasms, the Kruna had made Osiris more than unhappy.

Now, the Ankh flooded its power outward in earnest and catalyzed another transformation. Gabriel Soul's massive, masculine, fiendish nightmare form broke apart and dissolved in cracks and hisses. The power flowing out from the Ankh seemed to morph the matter it interacted with on an intricate, potentially molecular level. Bonds shifted and gained strength, but also lost much of the stability they had. Solids turned into liquids, and vice versa. As electricity flickered and intertwined with the Ankh's energies, the huge, undead, rapidly convulsing mass hovering in front of the Kruna let out cry after moaning cry in multiple simultaneous tones.

After the mass catabolism of its body, pieces reformed and reassembled into a new Gabriel Soul. It was a wonder just how long the Ankh could keep manipulating a now clearly failing and unstable body into capable, battle-ready vessels, but that did not stop it from trying. The new silhouette for Gabriel Soul resembled a shadowed, winged, legless woman of a deep, warm midnight purple hue. A faint, clouded semblance of a crown formed out of metal chunks and computer components. As the silhouette gained a definite shape, the Mother Computer Core took up residence within a sizable cavity in Gabriel Soul's torso once again.

The entity's hands warped into claws, and ribbons of darkness unraveled in waves from its crowned head; but the biggest and most unsettling change came from behind the Mother Computer Core. The Kruna could see a muddied, barely-recognizable image of Dr. Ezhno's mangled corpse within Gabriel Soul's new, tremor-filled body. With each passing moment, more of Dr. Ezhno fractured and melted away inside of Gabriel Soul. Tormented shrieks from beyond this realm haunted the room as Dr. Ezhno's corpse dissolved into liquid and dispersed within Gabriel Soul's form. By the time the Ankh rested its powers and completed Gabriel Soul's transformation, no trace of Dr. Ezhno remained, and all cries silenced forever.

The shadowy body of Gabriel Soul brightened, as if enriched with nourishment. At the same time, the number and rate of tremors and convulsions throughout Gabriel Soul's body increased. The whole undead creature looked liable to collapse at any moment. In fact, it almost appeared as if the Ankh was expending power trying to maintain what little stability was left throughout Gabriel Soul.

"You know what the weird thing is?" said Athelstan. "I can't tell if that thing shaking like that is good or bad."

"Maybe it just needs to shake some MORE!" Daisy yelled. She sprinted at Gabriel Soul, her already impressive speed now with a touch of extra acceleration and velocity. At the instant she broke inside of arms-length of Gabriel Soul, she punched out her Shotgun and rocked the creature with a fierce seismic wash of rumbling quakes. That chained into the Drill Dash Marut zoomed across the room to land on the undead creature. The more Gabriel Soul's body seemed compromised, the more power leaked from its form and circulated around it.

Bowser smashed his hands together and pulled them across his body to his right, spiraling flames whipping around his joined palms. "It can't hold together forever! Attack it with everything!"

As Bowser's power exploded in intensity in preparation for his Dual Phoenix Flame, Warra appeared out of thin air through his Alkemei Inpei's concealment power behind Gabriel Soul and stabbed his electrically-charged trident into its back. The gushing, zapping water that then flooded out of his trident pushed Gabriel Soul across Heavenly Hall at Bowser, who then ripped loose his Dual Phoenix Flame when Gabriel Soul barreled into point-blank range. Smothered in electrified water and searing fires, Gabriel Soul screeched and howled as its body continued its uncontrollable spasms.

"How about some of this?!" boomed Athelstan. He leapt at the flaming, violently twitching Gabriel Soul with his hammer up and encased in stone and his Odina active. The noise of contact alone when his behemoth hammer swing struck shook Heavenly Hall. Gabriel Soul's body bounced and ricocheted off of the floors and walls several times, each instance of contact worsening the undead

body's condition. With Daisy, Marut, Warra, Bowser, and Athelstan having attacked, and Neva too fatigued, that left Ramona, whom everyone had overlooked during their own attacks. Ramona now stood crouched and in a bright, beaming veil of golden light shining out and upward, her expression devoid of fear or apprehension.

"This time, STAY DOWN!" Ramona screamed. She thrust her crossed, empty-handed wrists ahead of her, birthing a powerful Hyperbeam. Her attack incinerated the air it flew through, crashed and burned through Gabriel Soul's upper body, and bore another hole into Heavenly Hall's walls. The brightness of her blast alone made all the other Kruna shield their eyes. Bowser even had to momentarily stop all of the power flow through his Alkemei Kracielle, for Ramona's Hyperbeam blinded his all-range vision too much for him to tolerate. More of Heavenly Hall caved in when Ramona's Hyperbeam dug into the far-left wall, but the concern remained primarily on Gabriel Soul. As Ramona's burst waned and faded, Gabriel Soul drifted through the air as a horribly disfigured, impaled, perpetually-shaking mass whose body bled power at an astonishing rate.

Daisy took a deep breath, her face and vision hazy as pain still throbbed within her. "Almost there... Just look at it..."

Bowser glanced at Daisy, then extended and ignited his Blazer Claws. "Daisy, let me finish it off!"

When Bowser's Blazer Claws grazed one another, sparks sizzled outward in an overhead arc. The Kruna Yura of Fire entered a dash straight at Gabriel Soul and slashed a left swipe into its body. Out of a spin, Bowser tore his right Blazer Claw through the creature. Gabriel Soul further suffered under the force of the fiery double kick that then came after, as well as the flaming drop kick that finished the chain. However, the undead monster refused to submit. It ricocheted off a wall and almost seemed to drift along the ceiling in zero gravity. All the tremors, spasms, and convulsions within Gabriel Soul reached an apex, which made many of the Kruna believe they only needed one more destructive hit on Gabriel Soul to finally destroy it.

But Warra noticed something alarming as Bowser prepared his

Fireball Flame Breath. "Bowser, wait! Stop!"

Bowser largely suppressed his mounting attack, confused. "For what?"

"That," Warra said, pointing at Gabriel Soul. "Don't you notice something? The shaking, the power leakage, the lack of offensive?"

The power emanating from Gabriel Soul continued growing in speed and scope. Gabriel Soul had no stability to its form whatsoever. Despite the rapid seizures contorting its body, Gabriel Soul now looked as if it had started transforming again.

"Wait, were we actually doing anything to it?" asked Marut.

"Yeah, but I guess not as much as we thought we were," said Daisy. "It's been preparing something this whole time; or maybe it wanted us to attack it. I don't know, but maybe its instability isn't entirely from us. It could be its own doing too..."

The whole of Heavenly Hall trembled with Gabriel Soul's amassing power. Gabriel Soul's body chipped away and broke down into something of simpler structure. The Mother Computer Core anchored itself within a black and purple mass suspended on the inside of a cage of winding, spiraling shadow ribbons. As the Ankh hovered above the dark cage, the mouth of the mass creaked open to grant a red and orange eye clear sight of the world around it. All other portions of Gabriel Soul dissolved into the expanding power circulating around it.

"That doesn't look good," said Marut.

"As a matter of fact, no – it looks like it'll explode," said Athelstan.

More of Heavenly Hall broke apart, portions of the floor, ceiling, and walls included. All seven Kruna huddled together and backed away, but they soon ran out of space to move. In addition to several other sections of Heavenly Hall, the great hidden corridor's exit caved in. And with the increasing quakes and the rainbow-strobing, expansive energies threatening to overtake all of Heavenly Hall, the Kruna found themselves with nowhere to go.

"Anybody got a plan for this?" asked Neva.

"Yeah – finish with this!" Bowser yelled. With a deep inhale and heaving exhale, Bowser expelled the Fireball Flame Breath he still had on standby. Unfortunately for them, Bowser's move only stalled the progression of Gabriel Soul's power. The moment Bowser's stream of flames eroded and his fireball faded, Gabriel Soul's energies picked up where they left off and continued expanding. Within the translucent cloud of power, the Kruna could see Gabriel Soul's body in a chaotic, jittery midair dance of turmoil.

"Anyone here got a different plan?" asked Neva. "One that'll work?!"

Daisy scowled at and clutched at her Vranzer. "Come on! Do something!"

The more surface area Gabriel Soul's power took up, the more speed it ballooned with. Athelstan attempted erecting new walls of stone as barriers between them and Gabriel Soul's power, but the walls did not hold up for long. Each barrier crumbled before Athelstan could bring forth a stronger defense of stone infused with metal, and even that did not last much longer. The furious flashing coming from within the enlarging energy signaled an imminent, devastating explosion.

"I think we've got about twenty seconds, max," said Athelstan.

"That's no time to do anything," Warra grimly remarked.

To Daisy's delight and relief, she saw her Vranzer now glowing with a bright black light. "Finally!"

Bowser watched Daisy step forward towards the incoming energy. "Whatcha have in mind?"

"I don't know!" Daisy replied with an uneasy smile. "I've got no idea how this pendant works! I'm just gonna try a Crystal Smash and hope for the best!"

Neva groaned. "We're screwed."

As Daisy concentrated her Nova Form abilities into her right fist,

Ramona darted in front of her with her Solar Greatsword raised in a reverse-grip. Light power blitzed out from Ramona's blade, in tandem with a stark increase in the Alkemei Vranzer's shine. They had but only seconds before Gabriel Soul's power would consume them, and no one expected any defense Ramona brought out to hold up for long.

"Ramona, get back!" Daisy demanded.

"I can do this!" Ramona screamed.

A divine shine erupted from the Vranzer when Ramona stabbed her sword into the ground. The barrier of light power that flooded out from Ramona's sword curled up around her and Daisy, then reached over to the other Kruna and surrounded them as well before swinging back down under and up to its origin. Floating inside a sphere of golden light, the Kruna Yura watched Gabriel Soul's explosion decimate the remainder of Heavenly Hall and continue spreading outward. Ramona's defense resisted the entirety of the explosion, keeping the Kruna safe for the time being.

Aside from the hue of the light shield Ramona had produced around them, all they could see was white. They heard nothing but destruction. And soon, all they could do was listen to the chaos and feel their sense of gravity fade. All seven of the Kruna Yura soon felt a lifting sensation, as if they had all been propelled upwards. Before long, the reality around the Kruna shifted from loud, blinding brightness to silent darkness.

Through the rubble that fell and settled, a voice of elegance murmured across the dark outside world, an aged voice of wisdom spreading its knowledge and omen to reality and anyone who could hear the sealed being capable of twisting heavens and heralding an age of eternal slumber...

…

…

In the beginning, there was nothing.

…

…

…

Then, there was chaos.

…

…

…

Chaos precedes order.

…

…

…

Order...falls back into chaos.

Chapter LVI

Protect our Precious World:

The moonlight revealed the quieting, receding smolders, gas, and raining debris at the plateaued top of a high hill in Evershade Valley's mountain range. As all came to a rest upon the newly flattened hill, an orb of light descended onto the hilltop's center. The orb contained Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, Marut, Neva, Ramona, and Nova Daisy, and it soon faded after safely returning the seven Kruna Yura to solid ground. Daisy's Alkemei Vranzer continued showing a brilliant glow, a glow that momentarily spread to her friends before vanishing as the Vranzer returned to a dim, inactive state.

"What a way for this to finally kick in and do something, huh..." Daisy said under her breath, staring at the pendant hanging on her neck.

Bowser worked his Kracielle's full-field vision in every direction. "We're still in Evershade Valley...but I don't think that the Command Center survived that explosion."

"At least we did though," said Marut.

"That went way better than I was expecting," said Ramona. "For some reason, I feel kind of rejuvenated after that."

"Yeah, me too," said Marut.

"Same," said Athelstan.

"I feel...better," said Neva. "Not great, not even okay...but...good enough..."

Marut went airborne to get a scope of the area. The flat, high hill they now stood on had a massive chunk of its side blasted out of it, where structural debris and mountain rock now lay instead. Gatehouse Road was near the base of the hill.

"Yeah, that building's history," said Marut. "That explosion spared

nothing."

"SPLIT!" Bowser suddenly shouted.

A thick, blazing blue cannon of energy rushed through the air at the Kruna, almost taking out the whole group had Bowser not warned them. The cannon rushed past all the Kruna, who dove out of harm's way. Said cannon crashed into a nearby mountain and bombed a sizable portion of its body off, catalyzing a rockslide. From the angle the blast had flown, their attacker was to their right and above.

"Whoaaaa – nope!" Marut screamed, whipping around in midair. "Nope! *All* the nopes there!"

Daisy's expression turned deathly intense. "That explosion spared something alright. Look who's back."

The Kruna returned to their feet and saw a crowned, Dark Matter-shaped entity of shadows housing a humongous orange-scarlet eyeball with a yellow iris and the Mother Computer Core inside. The new Gabriel Soul showed no trace of Dr. Ezhno, proof of his complete assimilation into the undead creature. The angelic wings Gabriel Soul had stripped from the Mother Computer had split back into two different, segmented pairs, glossed over with navy blue and purple; and the Alkemei Ankh hung over its body, the Ankh's chain attached to nothing whatsoever yet still seemingly bound to Gabriel Soul in the open space between its top pair of wings. Eight pink and light blue arrows stuck out from and rotated around the Dark Matter-esque entity without rest or any sense of order.

"So what?" said Neva. "It's some pointy eyeball with wings. Big deal. This might be its worst form yet."

Gabriel Soul twitched as it floated in midair, its eyeball gaining a white-hot glow. Its body revolved in place in an unorthodox manner, like an off-balance spinning top. Then it abruptly stopped, its gaze pointed skyward. A half-second later, a space-warping, neon blue energy beam screeched out of Gabriel Soul's eye. The gargantuan burst brought enough illumination to the sky to brighten a substantial portion of Evershade Valley, with its faint outer scope of light reaching the valley's border with Twilight City. The burst did not last

long, but it did not need to. Gabriel Soul spun itself a multitude of times and screamed a flurry of similar cannons in complete and total random abandon, one after another in just about any direction it happened to fire in. The undead creature had no aim. It just blasted. Over and over. Without ceasing. At anything. The sky, distant mountains, the Kruna, the hilltop plateau underneath it that the Kruna stood on; it did not care where. It just unleashed mayhem.

Gabriel Soul at least had a short delay between the times it stopped moving and the times it let loose blasts, which helped the Kruna avoid getting caught in any of the senseless attacks. None of the blasts lasted longer than a second, but they came out within every other second, and each time with a different otherworldly, mechanical, extra-dimensional wail. Several blasts gored holes into the current battlefield, with several others heading off to who knows where out in the sky and across the horizon. A couple of the chaotic cannons even soared out over Twilight City. Daisy made the mistake of trying to deflect one beam that flew straight at her; for though the punch she threw diverted the blast out into the mountains, it also knocked her a considerable distance away and almost made her tumble off the top of the hill to the valley below.

After what seemed like an endless chain of energy cannons, Gabriel Soul stopped its assault and idly floated about in the air. Its eyeball glared at the Kruna as a sickly dark smog of black, red, and lime green hues bubbled and gurgled around its body. Every sound that Gabriel Soul emitted sounded either horror-inducing or demonic.

"I don't agree," said Warra, trying to catch his breath. "This may be its worst form yet."

"Isn't that what I just said?" responded Neva.

Surreal echoes of a fiendish grunt signaled the coming of another inhuman outburst. This time, Gabriel Soul zipped across the flattened hilltop arena and threw out destructive pink and light blue energy blasts in any and every which way every time it stopped to change its own direction. Gabriel Soul had no pattern to its attacking. Its unpredictable flight forced the Kruna on the defense, for its sheer speed and aerial agility combined with its erratic movement could not be tracked by any unassisted mortal being. A

flotilla of energy blasts sputtered out in every possible direction there on the hill, the sight from a distance akin to a rapid-fire display of fireworks. Gabriel Soul's offensive bombarded every single Kruna there with torturous intensity and mowed over them. By the time the light show ceased, Gabriel Soul had succeeded in scattering each elemental wielder there like roadkill.

Fortunately, none of the Kruna had died. Not yet. But at the rate this clash had been going so far, their odds for survival plummeted with each passing second. They had almost no time to recover before Gabriel Soul prepared another frantic, frenzied fit. Now, the winged, studded spheroid spun itself in place. Its rotations made it appear as though it had glued itself to one singular point in three-dimensional space from which it curved and steered its eye. A speedy release of slow but steady cutting pink energy waves shot out of its eye in whichever direction its eye happened to point in at the time of each blast. Like the attacks before, Gabriel Soul did not act as though it had any target. The attacks just came, one blast after another.

"Not cool!" Neva screamed, beyond angry. "WHY DON'T YOU CHILL ALREADY?!"

Gabriel Soul ignored both Neva's furious shout and the dense, electromagnetically-charged ice column she shot out of her rifle at it. Her elemental blast tore through whatever burst Gabriel Soul ripped free and pounded it dead on. Not long after her blast connected, Bowser and Marut joined her efforts with similar beams of their own Volt Fusion-enhanced elements. Once Warra and Ramona added their support as well, Neva cut off her wave and imbued her rifle with the power her Null Hien had recorded off of Gabriel Soul. The second continuous burst Neva then pumped out of her rifle held twice the destructive power her first one had. Yet despite the barrage Gabriel Soul endured from five of the seven Kruna Yura, its attacking had not ceased. It still revolved in its place and blasted cutting energy slashes as electric and magnetic waves of flames, wind, water, light, and frost smothered its body.

As they individually prepared moves as well, Daisy and Athelstan both saw the oddity that had developed. It was as though Gabriel Soul had put itself in an uninterruptable sequence, even though the Kruna still heard damage being done to the undead creature's body.

Only after the conclusion of its own attacking did Gabriel Soul react to the fact that it had five separate elemental beams crashing into it. Gabriel Soul shot itself skyward to clear itself out of the way of the blasts, its body now trembling and convulsing more than ever before. Once it reached an apparent apex to its flight, Gabriel Soul curved back down and swept across the plateau past each of the Kruna. Once well behind them, Gabriel Soul then rose again and darted back and forth in random dashes and zigzags when the Kruna stopped their blasts and turned to face it.

"Dude, what are we fighting?!" groaned Marut.

"The most horrific eye infection I've ever witnessed," said Athelstan.

Now zooming throughout the air, Gabriel Soul closed in on the Kruna again and added an attacking component to its movement. In between its rapid decelerations and exponential accelerations, energy shockwaves crunched out of its body. The ripples snapped with ghoulish crispness and neared the Kruna faster than they expected, for Gabriel Soul focused its aerial dashes at them with little deviation. Given the devoted, directed effort, it was the only time so far that this phase of Gabriel Soul had acted with a target in mind.

With Daisy as the closest to it, Gabriel Soul locked in on her as it got within striking distance and soared at her like a crazed fastball screaming down home plate. One horrifically fast concussive burst pounded Daisy into the hilltop ground, chunks of debris exploding into the air. As quickly as Gabriel Soul attacked Daisy, it then rocketed at Bowser and succeeded in the exact same attack. It got a hit streak going as it struck down the other five Kruna in a similar manner, despite their best efforts to avoid danger.

All seven Kruna Yura now scattered about the plateau, Gabriel Soul darted to the center of their battlefield and began to spin in place, accelerating into revolutions at exceptional speeds. Strobe flashing from Gabriel Soul's body lit up the whole area a bright blue hue, which became a more constant light source once a spherical barrier of energy erupted around Gabriel Soul. Ear-wrenching mechanical screeching accompanied the expanding blue energy that now stabilized at a constant circumference and zapped electrical charges

and lightning strikes everywhere in every direction. Painful streaks zigzagged, arced, and curved at random, Gabriel Soul's lightning storm sparing none of the Kruna from its rage. The Kruna barely had enough sense in them to hear frantic, ghoulish screaming behind all the flashes of lightning buzzing past them and at them.

Gabriel Soul's lightning storm wreaked havoc on the plateau to enough of a point to cause a collapse of the entire remainder of the hill. Each random lightning strike blasted away and burrowed into portions of the hill until the whole landmass collapsed inward and crumbled. However, the Kruna did not fall with all of the rubble. Neva thought for sure they were in for a long drop into a pile of earth and mountain rock, but she did not fall. Once she realized she was floating in midair, she rolled herself around and saw the others floating too as Gabriel Soul's lightning assault quieted to an end.

"Huh?" Neva mumbled.

As the Kruna each acknowledged the bizarre lack of gravity, they also noticed that several portions of the destroyed hill had also not dropped. Gabriel Soul soared high above, its body blocking the bright moon when it stopped its ascent. The Kruna then felt themselves get pulled up with Gabriel Soul, along with plentiful amounts of debris, scrap metal, and even small trees. Nothing flew into Gabriel Soul, but the Kruna and what Gabriel Soul had dragged up with it stayed close.

"Hey, what are we doin' this high up?!" cried Neva, her legs flailing as she stared at Evershade Valley below.

"Why aren't we falling, is a better question," said Bowser. He stared at the warped space around Gabriel Soul that the moonlight highlighted. As Gabriel Soul's constant convulsions worsened, the spatial distortion spread outward around the undead creature and the Kruna. Soon, the Kruna and Gabriel Soul floated about in what could only be identified as a warped void. The world and the sky the Kruna once knew faded away, replaced with an animated backdrop in every direction around the Kruna and Gabriel Soul of darkened, animated, melded blue, purple, gold, black, and red blobs. The nature of the new environment made depth perception nearly irrelevant; for aside from themselves, Gabriel Soul, and the random

matter that tagged along, none of the Kruna could make out how much space they now had available to them to move around in.

With the moonlight now completely blotted out, the Kruna turned their attention to a different source of illumination. Daisy's Alkemei Vranzer gave off a shining silvery-black glow through the darkness of their current surroundings. The Vranzer cast both light and shadows across Daisy's body and face as she stared down at it in wonder.

"Daisy, do you know what your pendant's doing?" asked Ramona.

"No, but I know that it didn't take us to...wherever we are now," said Daisy.

"So then what's it glowing like that for?" asked Bowser.

"I wish I knew," said Daisy. Her expression shifted from one of uncertainty to a resolute gaze at their enemy. "But I know that as long as we've got the Vranzer, we will win!"

Gabriel Soul's body entered a terrible seizure, each contorting jerk it made pinching energy out of its form. The seizure continued while it darted in wild zigzags in the space in front of the Kruna. On a few instances, Gabriel Soul soared great distances away. The amount of space Gabriel Soul covered made no sense to the Kruna, for the initial field of distortion that it had created around them did not have the expansive reach for it to move about through in the way it did now.

"How are we supposed to beat this thing?!" screamed Neva. "It's freakin' nuts!"

"It's quite the hellspawn, to say the absolute least," muttered Warra.

"This might be simpler than it seems," said Athelstan, pointing at the creature. "Look. Does that appear at all to anyone like something that's very durable?"

"Hey, he's got a point!" said Daisy. "It can barely hold together as it is! Just keep blitzing it!"

Gabriel Soul executed a cut out of one of its aerial dashes and made a beeline straight for Athelstan. Unsure of how to move, Athelstan took the brutal tackle Gabriel Soul gave him and went fluttering about well behind the other Kruna. By the time Athelstan's momentum had stopped and he could readjust his body, his teammates looked like dots with how far away they were. Gabriel Soul then launched Daisy away from the group in another direction with a similar result for her before backtracking from the rest of the Kruna.

"Where *are* we?!" Athelstan wondered aloud.

"Hey, dudes!" Marut shouted. "You gotta put your whole body into it to fly around! It's just like how you would move any other time! Your muscles and stuff! There's just no gravity, is all!"

"For whatever reason," Bowser added. He kicked his legs about and gained some altitude, then haphazardly flipped around backwards. Ramona danced about from side to side, almost like a slowed-down imitation of what Gabriel Soul had been doing. Neva felt a great deal better, now that she had no pressure on her injured ankle.

While the others tried to get used to having no ground under their feet, Marut stomped his legs down and shot out from the group. The Kruna Yura of Air angled his body into a hard dive at their still convulsing enemy, ready to Drill Dash. Unfortunately, Gabriel Soul took that opportunity to twirl in place and set off an explosion of its energy. Marut aborted his attack as soon as he could and swept underneath into a loop away from Gabriel Soul's discharge, just grazing the outer edge of the hot pink energy he almost rushed straight into.

Gabriel Soul's explosive energy dissipated shortly after Marut's evasion, which gave Daisy a clear shot at it when her body came accelerating back into the scene. Leading with her left knee, Daisy zipped by the other Kruna and crashed into Gabriel Soul. Warra and Neva both followed up with combined electrified elemental shots out of their tools, though they only connected roughly half of their shots on their target as its momentum carried it off into the distance. The two Kruna then had to cancel their offensive once Gabriel Soul made a hard curve around to zoom back towards them, for the

creature unleashed a barrage of energy beams as it flew on a diagonal line to their left.

Gabriel Soul continued releasing thick, space-shredding energy bursts after altering its flight into swaying curves. In the midst of their evasive maneuvers, none of the Kruna noticed any of Gabriel Soul's blasts hit or connect with anything other than the debris that had followed them into their current unknown environment. The direction the blasts flew did not matter; when they missed the Kruna and soared off into the distance, whether upward, horizontally, down, or at any angle in between, the dozens of blasts that Gabriel Soul pumped out connected with nothing.

The Kruna had little time to ponder the nature of their surreal surroundings once Gabriel Soul's cannon assault stopped, for their opponent's instability and manic temperament reached an apex. The wings of Gabriel Soul opened up and generated an assortment of eight orbs, all darkened red and oozing with organic plasma. Another eight orbs splattered into being around Gabriel Soul's perimeter, making for a total of sixteen blood-filled spheroids. At the time of release, each Hemo Orb flew at the Kruna at a varied speed and arc from the other, similar in nature to Bowser's Tavado blast. With the Kruna now more or less regrouped, Ramona swept her sword up and cast a light barrier around her entire team for defense. Each Hemo Orb splashed in a sticky, mucky mess on the glass-like golden shield Ramona had projected, as did the second and third rounds Gabriel Soul pumped out across the short span of four seconds.

Ramona kept her defense up, just in case Gabriel Soul attempted another batch of Hemo Orbs. Instead, Gabriel Soul's wings expanded and clapped together in a thunderous smash. The bombarding shock waves Gabriel Soul's Angel's Judgment released broke through and shattered Ramona's light barrier, and the eight energy snakes of Gabriel Soul's Sinful Chain that ejected out of its body snatched all of the Kruna except Daisy and Neva. Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, Marut, and Ramona all suffered under the agonizing zapping of energy that ran through their bodies before Gabriel Soul flung the five elemental wielders away without any care for where they hurtled off to.

A chaotic, screech-filled tantrum overtook Gabriel Soul's body and prevented it from attacking for a while, granting the discarded and weary Kruna enough time to regain their bearings and fly back towards Daisy and Neva. It seemed as though even without the Kruna attacking it, Gabriel Soul lost more stability as time went on. However, Gabriel Soul also seemed to become more dangerous as it grew more unstable. The glowing Alkemei Ankh that had been hovering over Gabriel Soul beamed the brightest it had all night, much like Daisy's Vranzer now did.

Alright, no way it can survive much longer at this rate, thought Daisy, clutching her Vranzer. *I bet one more strong, solid hit oughta do it, and* you're *gonna help me.*

Without any indication of an attack on the way, several spiked projections shot out of Gabriel Soul's body and tracked towards Daisy. A swift twirl of her body got her away from the lengthy spikes that converged and stabbed the spot in space she was just in. Gabriel Soul retracted its extensions and then repeated the move on Neva, also failing that attempt as well. Again, Gabriel Soul paused as it lost control of its body. Seizing the opportunity, several of the Kruna went on the offensive. Bowser unleashed a Tavado blast, Marut and Neva unfurled a quick Chain Diffusion, Athelstan launched many of the floating rocks and boulders as projectiles, and Warra thrust a beam of electrified water.

All of the Kruna's attacks connected, but they did not produce anything close to their intended result. Soon after enduring the elemental onslaught, Gabriel Soul's form warped and stretched out in an overly elongated sphagettification high over the Kruna. The chaotic undead creature then faded into the realm's melded backdrop.

Gabriel Soul reappeared in several places at once as its whole – but transparent – self, afterimages and illusions masking its true whereabouts as the Kruna saw the creature everywhere. Each time the image of Gabriel Soul's body appeared, the laughter of a little girl reverberated throughout the void. With hundreds of Gabriel Soul bodies flooding the expanse one after another, the Kruna grew wary of a surprise attack and all put up individual defenses in case one of the images of Gabriel Soul turned out to be the real one. As Gabriel

Soul's body continued flashing about the warped void, the eye taking up the center of its form enlarged and gained a deep, crimson hue outside of its yellow iris.

"Look down!" Bowser screamed.

Everyone's gaze shot downward and saw a more opaque image of Gabriel Soul with its body pointing up at them and its huge eye burning with power. All focus went away from the countless Gabriel Soul images flashing around them to focus on the actual Gabriel Soul below them preparing what was almost certainly a vicious, lethal attack. Once Gabriel Soul's eye gained a fearsome charge of dark energy along with power from the Ankh, the false Gabriel Souls stopped appearing. Gabriel Soul's eye revolved in its socket and pumped out eight small black-purple-pink energized spheroids that spread out in a circular wave and exploded into disorganized, skyward-sailing energy cannons. Without any actual aim to its offensive, only two of the cannons engaged any of the Kruna. Neva's wall of ice and Athelstan's stone barrier provided minimal protection and got decimated, leaving the two of them defenseless for the second round of Gabriel Soul's Chaos Breaker. The completely random nature of the attack and its cannons' trajectories spared Neva and Athelstan but stripped Warra, Bowser, and Marut of their elemental defenses.

Daisy's eyes flared wide-open, her Vranzer mirroring them with its glow. "Now!"

As Gabriel Soul prepared a third Chaos Breaker, Daisy reorganized the earth she had gathered in front of her into an unbound crystal hexagon. She somersaulted and whipped her body down into a descent at wicked speeds to Gabriel Soul, her fist up by her face with her crystal trailing her. The Nova Form Kruna of Earth reached Gabriel Soul the instant before its Chaos Breaker again birthed destructive energy pellets. With as much strength as she could combo with her momentum, Daisy lashed out at Gabriel Soul with a hearty punch and a fierce Crystal Smash that the punch itself also cast. Twelve Chaos Breaker Orbs escaped from Gabriel Soul's body as Daisy's punch landed on its eye, but the cannons they generated all fired in directions that did not endanger any of the Kruna.

Immediately following her fist's connection, the spikes of Daisy's Crystal Smash thrust into Gabriel Soul. But before the thick, heavy crystal masses got to pierce and impale Gabriel Soul, the creature erected an energy barrier from its eye that threatened to push Daisy and her Crystal Smash off of it. The extreme repulsion forces Gabriel Soul emitted turned from a defensive move into a counter attack when it expelled more power into its barrier. Almost mimicking the form for Andrew's Shadow Ripper, Daisy clutched the wrist of her fist responsible for the Crystal Smash attack and willed herself and her elementals into Gabriel Soul through the excruciating amount of pressure.

Desperate for survival, the wildly trembling undead creature beneath Daisy unraveled a third surge of power to augment the energy trying to wrestle her away. The other Kruna watched from above the bright blue-pink glow that came from the struggle below. Before the others could react, Ramona flipped her Solar Greatsword into a reverse grip, enlightened her sword with the remainder of her elemental power, and darted down to Gabriel Soul. Just as Daisy could feel a fourth surge from Gabriel Soul start to unhinge her, Ramona came screaming down behind her and jammed her sword into the energy barrier. Gabriel Soul's power clashed with Daisy's crystal and Ramona's light in a stalemate, neither of Daisy's nor Ramona's attacks piercing through despite the void-warping light show now brightening the scene.

The Vranzer's glow reached a peak as Daisy urged her Crystal Smash on. Daisy's grunting and groaning escalated into a ferocious roar that accompanied a violent, vehement fortification and splitting of her Crystal Smash into longer, more numerous, spikier sections. Following Daisy's lead, Ramona put every last ounce of effort she could into her shining stab. Still, the chaotic undead creature refused to succumb to the two Kruna's might; but its efforts could not sustain the fleeting remainder of its own structural integrity, for the clash created a level of instability it could not handle. Gabriel Soul's power faltered as its form failed and began to crack. Together, the two Kruna overwhelmed Gabriel Soul's energy barrier and punched through it. Daisy's crystal and Ramona's charged sword penetrated the barrier and Gabriel Soul's body, shredding the creature into seizuring chunks and convulsing pieces that glowed with a white hot

light and exploded.

A multitude of events happened all at once with the explosions of Gabriel Soul. The explosions themselves flung Daisy and Ramona upward and well past the other Kruna. Such a rapid-fire chain of blasts also detached the Alkemei Ankh and sent it fluttering in the opposite direction. Marut saw the Ankh flying off and set up to pursue it, but he never got the chance to. Each bright bang coming from Gabriel Soul's failing body also fractured portions of the void around the Kruna. Before long, parts of the warped world around them either faded or cracked and snapped away like broken glass. As moonlight above and Evershade Valley below became visible, gravity gradually gained back its effects on the seven Kruna Yura.

The Ankh soared off into the horizon while Gabriel Soul's body continued its catastrophic, chaotic meltdown high in the night sky above Earth, but none of the Kruna could worry about anything other than the free fall they were now stuck in. The Kruna had much too far of a drop to manage a safe landing on their own; but luckily, they had Marut. The Kruna of Air whirled his body and saber around in a tremendous sweeping slash that brought forth a gusting jet stream burst underneath all seven of them. Marut's manipulation of the air slowed their descent to a floaty glide and blew them to a safe landing by Gatehouse Road and the remains of the hill that once supported MAE Command Center. Once each Kruna landed on solid ground, all eyes went up to the explosive lights brightening the night and the tormented screams echoing out into the darkness. One final explosion and one last deformed cry rocked the sky and signaled the end of Gabriel Soul. Now, instead of an otherworldly void, the sky above shined with a rainfall of glittery sparkles and a heavenly cascade of moonlight that reintroduced peace to the night and the world below.

After several seconds of quiet passed, Daisy looked down and rubbed at her sweaty forehead with a heavy sigh. Much like all the other Kruna then did, she collapsed and slid to the ground. Rainbows of sparkles blanketed the entirety of Evershade Valley and Twilight City, with no sign of any automated robot, demented machine, or chaotic doom engine in sight.

"I think it's safe to say, it's over," Daisy panted, sprawled out on her

back. As if agreeing with her, the black gem of Daisy's Vranzer lost all of its glow.

"Finally," Neva murmured, smiling up at the sky. "I hope we never fight anything that persistent ever again... That was a nightmare..."

"Thankfully, that was a nightmare that had an end," said Warra, on his hands and knees. "I had nothing left to work with."

"Me neither," said Athelstan, keeled over on his stomach.

"Or I," said Bowser, leaning back on his shell and hands.

Marut rocked off of his side and onto his feet. "I basically spent what I had left bringing us down here."

"What about you, Daisy?" asked Ramona, trying to press herself up. "I can barely even feel my body with how hurt and tired I am..."

Daisy giggled, transitioning out of her Nova Form to return to her normal state. "I had just enough to get the job done."

"Me too," Ramona said. Once she managed to get back up without her wobbly body making her lose her balance, she walked over and reached her hands out to Daisy. "So now what?"

Daisy grabbed Ramona's hands and stood up, her smile fading. They stared at the destroyed hill and the MAE Command Center ruins as the other Kruna rose to their feet. The Kruna all knew of Dr. Gabriel Ezhno's fate, but no one knew what had happened to Chrissy.

Chapter LVII

Castle in the Sky:

The seven Kruna Yura had split up and scoured Evershade Valley for any sign of Chrysanthemum Sindograss, MAE's commander-in-chief. They had last seen her with them in MAE Command Center's Heavenly Hall, but she had since slipped away in the midst of the chaos that had transpired because of Gabriel Soul. Daisy, Warra, and Ramona went through the trees and fields nearby, while Bowser and Athelstan looked through the MAE Command Center wreckage. Marut searched the land with an overhead view in the cool night sky, an eye out for both Chrissy and the Alkemei Ankh. But the last time anyone had caught sight of the Ankh, it was sailing far off into the distance following Gabriel Soul's destruction and not looking like it would slow down any time soon. The best the Kruna could do for now was hope the Ankh would not end up in the wrong hands.

With her ankle still bothering her greatly, Neva sat against one of the fences along Gatehouse Road and stared at the bright moon, mindful of the wound in her back. A set of seven stars glistened above to the right of the moon, one star red, another blue, another a silvery-black, yet another a tanish-brown, a fifth one green, then a bright white-blue, and the final one a white-hot gold. All seven of them floated spread out in the night sky, twinkling and sparkling. Soon, an eighth one drifted into view. A vibrant, deep purple, the dark star seemed to complete the existing set of seven. However, it stayed the most distant, as if something was preventing it from joining the rest.

"I need a looooong vacation after this," Neva heard Athelstan say. She turned and saw Bowser and Athelstan stepping out of and away from the remains of MAE Command Center. Bowser disbanded the fire around his Flare Sword, a source of light he had sparked to help them see through the darkness a little better.

"Well, no body," said Bowser. "So, presumably, she got away..."

"Unless she got crushed into nothing," said Athelstan.

Marut dove down from above and set his feet on the grass near the group. "Can anyone sense anything other than us?"

"No..." said Ramona, walking back with Daisy. Warra soon returned as well, but found nothing noteworthy to report on. That meant Chrissy was gone, and no one had a clue as to where she could have fled to.

"Ah, never mind her," Daisy eventually said. "We don't gotta worry about her anymore."

Bowser scowled. "No you did not just say that."

"What?" Daisy asked. "You think she's a threat to anyone? We just got through trashing her whole organization, wrecking her tech, cutting down her workforce, and demolishing her supercomputer. What can she really do? She knows she can't do anything now. She knows she lost. All she can do now is integrate herself into society as a normal person and leave all this MAE business behind."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's exactly what she has in mind," muttered Neva.

"I dunno, Daisy," said Athelstan. "We've all seen how stubborn she is. I think we needa track her down."

"I shouldn't have saved her," grumbled Bowser. "I should've just let her suffocate under that sandstorm attack..."

"Heh, you guys are really that worried about her?" said Daisy. "Please. After what she just got through seeing and experiencing, she learned her lesson, I'm sure. Like Grekka, and Elkon, and Marissa, and the Black Mages."

"And what about Kokoro, huh?" said Bowser. "And King Boo?"

"Where *is* King Boo?" asked Marut.

Neva squinted, confused. "I don't know..."

"Haven't seen him since the Bellbridge night..." murmured Ramona.

"You can't compare Chrissy to them," said Daisy. "Those two are in a different category."

"Oh, are they?" grunted Bowser. "Just because they're exponentially more powerful than her doesn't mean they don't share the same mindset. I don't think us effectively ruining her short-lived life is gonna sit well with her."

"Agreed," said Athelstan. "And she didn't exactly spend this whole night apologizing, did she?"

"She spent a good long while crying and begging for us not to touch her," grumbled Neva. "Aside from that, she didn't seem to act any different towards us."

"Maybe seeing what happened to Dr. Ezhno will make her change her attitude," said Ramona.

"Who knows," said Athelstan. "It seemed to me like she had more regret over herself and her failings over any actual wrongdoing..."

Daisy frowned. "At least she won't be able to show her face in public again once we report all the dirt we've got on MAE and everything we've found tonight. Still got all the records and evidence and stuff we snagged, Athelstan?"

"Oh yeah!" Athelstan replied, patting his Hammerspace Belt. "Right in here."

"Good," Daisy replied with a nod. "And then after that...we need to figure out where to find Andrew."

Ramona gave a nod herself as well. "Because the one we faced earlier was just a clone."

"How about it, Neva?" said Daisy. "When do you wanna get started on looking for Andrew?"

"Pfft, fat chance any of us find him," said Neva.

"What do you mean?" said Daisy. "You don't know that!"

Neva gave Daisy an annoyed look. "So then how were you even planning on finding him?"

"I don't know – I mean, I had a plan, but it looks like that fell through. The Universal Database is almost certainly destroyed now...so trying to find one of the Black Mages to take to Rosalina and recalibrate Ramona's Motomeru just got considerably more difficult..."

"Exactly. So once again, we're back where we started. He's gone. And...I think I can accept that now."

"He's not gone! We just haven't found a way to find him!"

"And where would he even be?" Neva asked. "Kidnapped and hidden somewhere? Who'd do that? Really? And for what? He's just gone. He could very well be dead at this point."

"Oh c'mon, Neva! It's not that bad..."

"It's not good or bad anymore. It's just...whatever. The sooner I move on, the better."

"Maybe we could see about tracking down some sort of backup archive of that database!" said Athelstan. "It could be an online source, or it could be in offline storage on some special hardware. Or better yet, I remember Rosalina having a book in the Cosmic Archives that has on record just about every Alkemei there is, so maybe we can check that book out and see what it says about the Motomeru. Then we can try to reprogram the Motomeru ourselves!"

"Not a bad idea at all!" Daisy said. "It can't be that hard, can it? In fact-"

"No," said Neva. "That's it. No more. I needa move on and stop thinking about him. And I'm looking forward to not having him on my mind all the time and haunting me. I need to get myself straightened out, and get some kind of normal life together. I shouldn't be obsessing and getting worked up over someone I'll never see again."

Daisy sighed. "Whether or not you're still into him is one thing – but he's still a friend. You're just gonna turn your back on him? Just like

that?"

"No one's ever finding him," mumbled Neva. "What am I turning my back on? Look, guys...he's not coming back."

Daisy growled and turned to Ramona. "Hey, Ramona, you think Andrew's still out there, don't you?"

"He is, actually," said Ramona. "I wasn't sure earlier, but I can feel it. He's somewhere."

"Then that's good enough for me," said Daisy.

"I just hope he's not in danger yet," said Warra.

"Hmm? Yet?" asked Daisy.

"If he's missing but still alive after all this time, then that means someone must have taken him," said Warra. "And for a reason."

"But what reason?" asked Bowser.

"Who knows," said Warra. "The person in question can't be trying to use him as ransom or to lure us into a trap. Otherwise, we would've at least been tipped off to something. But no trace left? That must mean they just wanted him. And only him. But then that makes you wonder again: for what reason?"

"Does he have any enemies?" asked Athelstan.

"The same enemies we have," said Bowser. "Kokoro, who doesn't seem to know where he is either, and King Boo."

"Then, it has to be King Boo," said Daisy. "He's been gone for just about as long as Andrew, and they don't like each other very much."

Warra nodded. "Yes... But King Boo doesn't like us either. Even though he does dislike Andrew the most, he should be going after all of us, not just him. Yet, he's been nowhere to be seen. None of us have encountered him. So it can't be him."

"Man, what a mystery..." murmured Daisy.

Warra looked at Ramona. "If you know something that we don't, Ramona, now would be the time to say so."

Ramona had been anxiously staring at the ground, but glanced up when Warra addressed her. "Why me?"

"You know him best," said Warra. "You're essentially siblings; so if you know anyone who could have a grudge or vendetta against him who could be responsible for his disappearance, tell us now."

Before Ramona could reply, Neva spoke up instead. "Uh, how about we get outta here so I can go to the hospital?! I'd rather not spend the whole night here and watch the sun rise!"

"Oh, sorry, Neva," said Daisy. "We should get moving. There's nothing left for us here, right?"

"Not anymore," said Bowser.

Taking into account time zones, the Kruna Yura's trip east in the Koopa Cruiser to complete their round trip and return from the eastern world to the Mushroom Kingdom ended in an early evening arrival the next day. Much of MAE's technologies, products, and enhancements remained, but all of their robots and artificial intelligence had shut down. Townspeople had spent several hours cleaning up the randomly discarded mechanical bodies littered about the streets. By nightfall, Daisy and Ramona had escorted Neva to Peach's Castle following a trip to a local hospital to get her ankle checked out and fitted with a cast and walking boot. Peach herself had already gotten to work with the other Kruna and some of her associates, going over the Kruna's discoveries and MAE's secrets.

With Ramona and Neva heading straight to bed, and the others busy formulating the means to publicly unveil MAE's truths and restore the Kruna's reputation, Daisy left the castle and headed to her own home for the night. On her walk through Toad Town, she saw several large trucks parked throughout the streets. Many residents and workers gathered the last of the inactive, disabled

MAE robots into the trucks.

Hopefully, they'll take them someplace where they'll get recycled , thought Daisy. *This'll all be over and put behind us soon enough...*

As she continued through the streets, Daisy's mind relayed memories of the clashes throughout MAE Command Center. Everything about the ordeal bothered her, including Kokoro's dirty move on Neva. However, her mind focused mostly on the Mother Computer, as well as what became of it under the Alkemei Ankh's influence.

We need to put into perspective the nature of just what we had to deal with at the end, Daisy said in thought. *An extremist ultra computer is one thing and bad enough on its own, but what it ultimately evolved into is what's the most concerning.*

Daisy grasped her Alkemei Vranzer, the Pendant of Fate. *I still don't understand how this works...but I have an idea now, at least... As long as I have the will, then this pendant will help me get to where I need to be...or where I'm trying to go... It will give me a way, a route; but it's up to me to do the rest... So this* could *actually be a fate-altering Alkemei after all. And if it is, then this may be even more powerful than the Ankh... Manipulating fate could be more powerful than creating life...*

Daisy stopped walking and looked to the stars. *Maybe instead of trying to figure out where Andrew is, all we really need to do...is have the Vranzer guide us. Not Ramona's Motomeru. Maybe the only thing keeping him away from us...is me...and all I actually need to do is put all my willpower into the thought of him being here with us, just like how I had thought hard about us having the power to beat the Mother Computer, or when I thought hard about jamming a Crystal Smash into that thing and shredding it apart...*

Yawning, Daisy directed her focus back in front of her and resumed her short trek home. *If that's the case, then no wonder I could never activate the Vranzer when I wanted to. It's so obvious now – the Vranzer isn't like other Alkemei! Maybe instead of trying to force something with power, I should've been focusing on influencing through thought and intention more instead... So if I focus on the*

thought and intent of getting home, then I'll get there faster so I can eat and go to sleep sooner.

Unfortunately for Daisy, she returned home to a mostly barren fridge. Dejected and too tired to even bother getting into her bed, Daisy crashed on her couch and decided to wait until morning to go out and get food. She fell asleep with an arm and a leg hanging off the side, but stayed asleep throughout the night. Soon after she dozed off, her Vranzer generated a faint, sustained glow...

"Daisy!" a familiar voice called out. "Daisy! Earth to Daisy! Ha, get it?"

Daisy awoke to find herself flat on her stomach on a landmass in the middle of a field of clouds. She saw several other similar earthy and rocky masses in the backdrop of the pink sky, including many above her and one nearby that held an elaborate castle that seemed like a fantastical creation ripped straight out of a fairy tale. A young man standing in front of Daisy in all-black reached his hand out to her, and she grabbed it and let him pull her up. She pieced the voice she had heard and the appearance of the shadow wielder in front of her together to realize that Andrew was there with her.

"Andrew?" Daisy said. "How did I...where... Is that actually you?"

"Whatcha mean?" asked Andrew. "I'm about as me as I can get."

"No, I mean, is that really you, standing there?" asked Daisy, holding her head. "And...how did I get here?"

Andrew shrugged. "I dunno. It's your dream."

"My dream? I'm dreaming about you? So you're not actually here?"

"Probably not. But you're probably too tired to wake up anyways, so why not stick around?"

Daisy gave an uneasy smile. "Stick around where?"

"We're up in the clouds," replied Andrew. "You know. Like that

twinkle star nursery rhyme." He paused and gazed up at the sky. "Hey, you think there's some place out there called 'Twinkle Star?' That'd be a sweet name! Maybe it's all cosmic and astral and junk. Like, all of its ground looks like some kind of map of outer space."

"Strange place to have a dream," said Daisy.

"Yeah, but you have some freaky dreams every now and then, right? Kinda makes me wonder if we should feel awkward that I'm here this time. Should I be concerned?"

"I hope not. Look, I don't get what's going on. Just why *are* you in my dream?"

"What? You don't miss me? Some friend you are."

"I didn't mean it like that! I mean...this just seems kind of random."

Andrew made a soft smile. "Does it?"

Daisy stared at him, at first thinking the question had an obvious answer but then stalling her response in wonder. Andrew did not give her much time to answer, speaking up again before she did and essentially making his question rhetorical. "That's a cool new Alkemei," he said. "I bet it helped out a lot already."

"I'm not sure, really," Daisy said, peering down at her glistening Vranzer. "But I feel like whatever it did, or has been doing, it did just enough of to help turn things in our favor."

Andrew shook his thumb in the direction of the floating castle behind him. "Good. You'll need it working for when you figure out how to get *there.* "

"Why? What's in there?" asked Daisy.

The grand doors to the castle opened up, and a vortex of shadows and sparkling magic created an intense suction funnel. However, the vortex did not seem to pull on anyone but Andrew. As the vortex reeled in Andrew, the Kruna Yura of Shadow's body broke apart and dissolved into a purple and black mist that soon disappeared altogether within the castle. The doors then shut, and Daisy no

longer heard or sensed Andrew's presence.

"Hey! Wait!" Daisy yelled. "Come back! Andrew!"

"I don't think he went in there on his own accord," Bowser said.

Daisy turned around and saw Bowser and Marut walking towards her. "Hey, how'd you guys get up here?"

Marut shrugged. "Don't know dude, it's your dream. You tell me."

"Guys, we gotta get into that castle and bust Andrew outta there!" said Daisy, vehemently pointing at the floating building looming ahead of them.

"But how?" asked Bowser. "We can't fly."

"Oh, wait – I can!" cheered Marut.

"Great, you'll fly us over there!" said Daisy.

"Okay!" replied Marut.

And then Marut just stood there, grinning. At no point did he activate his Furaito. After some time had passed with Marut doing absolutely nothing, Daisy glared at him.

"Marut?" Daisy said.

"Yeah?" Marut said, still grinning.

"Aren't ya gonna fly us over there?"

"Yup!" Marut replied.

"Today?!" Daisy yelled.

"Well, I'm trying, but I can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, you ever have those dreams where you suddenly can't do something, and you don't know why? Like, running? Or lifting

something heavy that you should be able to lift in the first place?"

"I think so."

"Yeah, I got some of that goin' on."

"But it's not *your* dream!"

"Yea-hea, I know!"

Daisy raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. "Then how are we gonna get to that castle?"

"Maybe we can't," said Bowser. "At least, not yet."

"Why ya say that?" asked Daisy.

"It could be like a video game!" said Marut. "In certain games, there's special places you can't go to towards the end of the game because you need to meet special conditions or requirements first to unlock them. Could be anything too, like finding certain items, or learning some special ability, or doing stuff in some specific places. And until then, you can't actually get to where you want to go. And there's no cheat codes or anything like that that I know of, so we can't just sequence break reality. Even if the reality is open-world at first, the players still can't get to those special areas without fulfilling those special needs."

"Well that sucks," said Daisy.

"Nah, that's good game design," said Marut. "If everybody could just get to the end of an adventure right away, then what's the point in playing the game? That sounds like some mad wasted cash for only thirty minutes of content."

"But this isn't a game," said Daisy.

"Exactly," said Marut. "If this was a game, there'd be cheat codes. I don't see cheats anywhere around here, dude."

"Talk about a breath of fresh air," said Athelstan, sliding down a layer of clouds from above. He landed onto the same landmass as

the others and joined them. "Don't these high altitudes just invigorate your lungs and cleanse your whole system out?"

"Oh, hey, Daisy," said Ramona, now standing on Daisy's right and waving at her. "You're here too?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't she be?" said Bowser. "It's her dream."

Daisy groaned. "Alright, you guys; what do you think we should do?"

"About what?" asked Ramona.

"That castle!" Daisy stuck her finger straight at the floating structure. "Andrew got sucked into there!"

"Why doesn't Marut just fly us over there?" asked Athelstan.

"Weren't you listening?!" barked Daisy.

"To what?" said Athelstan. "I just showed up."

Daisy haphazardly flopped onto her back. "You guys are usually more dependable than this..."

Ramona smiled. "Aw, sorry, Daisy. We're as confused as you are."

"And how's that?" asked Daisy.

"How are we supposed to know that?" Warra said with a shrug, suddenly now standing behind Daisy and facing away from the group. "This is your dream, not any of ours."

"Alright, alright – I get it!" snapped Daisy, flailing her arms and legs about.

"Daisy, your dream sucks," Neva said, sitting on the edge of their hovering landmass and kicking her feet back and forth. "Why'd you have to put us up here? I thought you'd at least be dreaming about forests and caves, not some stranded sky islands in clouds."

Daisy sat up. "I don't remember asking for your commentary."

"I think Ramona has a point though, Daisy," said Bowser. "How can

you really expect us to give you any answers when we're just characters in your dream?"

"Wait," Daisy mumbled, giving Bowser a blank look. "So you mean this whole time, I've basically been talking to myself? In my sleep?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with you, weirdo," said Neva. "Get a grip."

"Neva, maybe we're here for a reason," said Ramona.

"To help her realize her brain's full of dirt clods?" said Neva.

"No, but to help her realize something," said Ramona.

Marut gulped down handfuls of popcorn from a large bag he now held, speaking with his mouth full as he chewed. "Hmm...nah, I think we're just here to get wrecked by that dude over there."

The seven Kruna all gazed at the castle and saw someone standing in front of its doors and by the edge of the landmass holding it. From what they could tell, the figure had a decidedly feminine figure and did not seem much taller than Neva. However, she was made almost entirely of a dense, flowing, purple and black fog of darkness and golden, glistening magic with two piercing neon gold eyes and a loose and animated mane. Purple, outward-facing crescents sat under the girl's eyes. Her hair spiked and stiffened but mostly split outwards instead of up, extending a little and making the lowest spikes thick but ribbon-like, with some of the topmost hair lifting symmetrically across both sides of the body to resemble wings and horns. Daisy sensed from the new dark figure a clouded but potent level of power. Actually, Daisy sensed two separate and distinct powers from within the woman once she focused on her energy signature long enough.

"Who's that?" murmured Daisy. "That's not the Shadow Queen...is it?"

"No, not quite..." Bowser said under his breath.

"I can't tell if she's friendly or not," said Daisy. "It's weird. I feel like she's harmless. But at the same time...I also feel like she could cause a lot of destruction."

Strangely, Ramona felt the most disturbed with the new figure's appearance. Daisy glanced at Ramona when she heard Ramona shaking and whimpering. The Kruna of Light's reaction seemed familiar, making Daisy think back to the day the two of them had just recently spent together out and about in the Mushroom Kingdom. But Daisy did not give it too much thought, for Ramona tended to be more timid and worrisome than the others. With the potential threat now staring them down however, Daisy understood Ramona's fright.

At the simple raise of a hand, the shadowed girl cast all of the Kruna out of the air. The barreling bombardment of shadow power that flew at the Kruna launched them off the suspended section of land and into a plummeting descent out of the sky world. As they dropped further, the Kruna saw all hints of a land within the clouds disappear. The realm above now resembled a normal sky; but the world below accelerated at the Kruna evermore quickly with each passing second.

"DAISY! DO SOMETHING!" Neva screamed.

"What can I do?!" yelled Daisy.

"I don't know – it's your dream, mud-mouth!" barked Neva.

"Hey, yeah, I'm dreaming!" said Daisy.

"Nah, ARE YOU?!" growled Bowser.

"And this falling thing is something we've already dealt with!" said Daisy.

"Aren't dreams about falling supposed to wake you up?!" shouted Athelstan.

"Got a better idea!" Daisy replied. "Marut! Put a gust up!"

Marut smiled and whipped his body around in a wicked twirl, unlimbering his Gust Boomerangs in the process and sweeping a colossal updraft through as they neared a forested field. His great gusting burst of wind slowed everyone's stop to a slow float and scattered them into a spread out landing on the grass. Once sure that the others had landed safely, Daisy peered up at the sky. She

saw no castle among the clouds and sunset.

"Rad job, Marut," said Daisy. "But it looks like that castle's a no go."

"For now," Marut's voice echoed.

Daisy gasped and glanced all around her. All of her fellow Kruna had vanished, leaving her standing alone in an open field full of trees, lakes, and aged stonework ruins spanning several stories tall. The warm, autumn-esque coloration of the landscape seemed quaint and tranquil; yet, almost unconsciously, Daisy entered her Nova Form. She herself wondered why she bothered transforming, for she looked at her body in bewilderment. Then she noticed her Vranzer shining in earnest.

"The Vranzer..." Daisy murmured. "Now what's it doing?"

A new body materialized a short distance in front of Daisy. The body mirrored Daisy's current Nova Form state to an exact dimension, at least in terms of silhouette. However, the new figure seemed to be made entirely of bronzed, gold-glowing earth elementals and materials. The size of the earthen Daisy's eyes also appeared notably larger and brighter, paired with spikier hair. In a way, the Daisy copy seemed like an earth version of the shadowed girl her and the other Kruna had encountered in the world above.

A booming clash crunched in the sky, scattering light power and shadow power everywhere. Daisy looked again to the clouds, eyeing what appeared to be a battle between a light wielder and a shadow wielder. Several successive similar clashes transpired before the light counterpart of the shadowed girl and the earthen Daisy floated down through a gap in the clouds. Heavenly light shined on the girl made of light as she descended along a faint and translucent but massive image of a giant beanstalk.

A multitude of voices all hit Daisy at once as the heavenly light spread across the pink sunset and the tree-laden field of lakes and ruins. The voices called out to her calmly but in broken speech, many of the voices from people she knew. But the words came too quick and in too jumbled of a mess to decipher just who said what. She just knew she heard Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, Ramona, Neva,

Marut, Andrew, Peach, Rosalina, Polari, Lubba, Wario, Waluigi, and Toadette. Even Mario and Luigi snuck in too. The more the voices spoke, the more the world around Daisy brightened and faded away.

"Daisy!"

"We must find him-"

"Eight together-"

"Castle of dreams-"

"The SOUL-"

"Alkemei Ankh-"

"Master Pendant-"

"The forbidden realm-"

"Kokoro-"

"Seal-"

"Osiris-"

"The False Angel-"

"The Shadow Queen-"

"Dreaded return-"

"Chaos-"

"Absolute Zero-"

"Gaia Nova-"

"Ascend-"

"Lumo Nova-"

"Upheaval and breakdown-"

"Balance and renewal-"

"Ramona-"

"Pure of heart-"

"Go further beyond-"

"Vranzer-"

"Stop The End-"

"True potential-"

"For a friend..."

…

"I'll miss you..."

And then Daisy woke up. It was morning. A peaceful sunrise brought new light.

Chapter LVIII - FINAL

Teardrop:

Daisy thought little of her bizarre dream from earlier that morning, but it lingered in her mind. As she lay out in the grass that afternoon under the shade of a tree in the spacious courtyard backyard of Peach's Castle with Ramona, Daisy felt restless. But she smiled when Ramona knelt by her and stuck a flower in her hair.

"A daisy for Daisy," Ramona said, sitting and leaning up against the tree trunk.

"Nice!" said Daisy. "We barely ever got to see any of these with the places we've been to in the past couple weeks."

"Well, based on what the others can negotiate, a good portion of MAE's mechanization should get reversed."

"I hope so. The next adventure we have, I hope it has nothing to do with robots or technological powerhouses. I'm very confident...that it won't. I also got a feeling we're gonna have a busy autumn ahead of us."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because autumn's just better to say. When you say 'fall,' someone can easily get confused and think you're talking about someone falling."

Ramona giggled. "No, I mean, why do you say this *autumn* will be busy?"

Daisy sat up, her expression turning less relaxed and more solemn. "Because from now until whenever we find him, which will mean the rest of the summer on through into autumn, most likely, we're focusing on finding Andrew."

Ramona nodded. "Right. We need to. And who knows how long

that'll take..."

"Partially depends on you," Daisy said.

"Me? Why me? Oh, because of my Motomeru, right? If we can get it programmed similarly to how it worked in the future-"

"Actually, I was thinking of something else aside from that."

"Oh...like what?"

"You remember what Warra had asked you yesterday, don't you?"

"I...maybe..."

"Ramona, I hate to have to pry... But I need you to tell me if you know something about Andrew that you haven't been telling us."

Ramona felt worry and concern well up in her. With a muted murmur, she looked down at the grass. Daisy could sense the uncertainty coming from the light wielder next to her.

"If somebody's got it out for him, we need to know," said Daisy. "Even if you don't think it could be them. At this point, anyone could be a possible suspect. Especially someone who has something against him."

"Well, not against him," said Ramona. "Er, maybe, not solely him. But, mainly against me..."

"What?" Daisy asked. "I don't get how that could make any sense...unless..."

Before either Kruna said anything more, Bowser trotted up to them. Ramona looked up and saw their fire teammate approach, the Koopa King in a pleasant mood but not overtly overjoyed. His expression seemed as contemplative as Daisy's.

"Hi, Bowser," Ramona said as Daisy popped to her feet.

"Hey, big guy, what's up?" Daisy said, raising a fist.

Bowser smiled for a moment and bumped her fist with his, noticing black arm bands and then black ankle bands as well where her wrist and ankle weights used to be. "Peach told me you were hanging out over here when I asked for you. Listen, Daisy... I've been meaning to tell you this: the next chance you get whenever Rosalina's finished with whatever she and Mario and Luigi have been doing, you should go up there. To the observatory."

Daisy nodded, clutching her Alkemei Vranzer. "Right, I should. She could know what to do with the Vranzer, and have some insight on how or where to find Andrew."

Bowser gave Daisy a focused stare. "Perhaps, but I more meant that you should go for a different reason. I think you should ask her about Nova Form."

Daisy stared back, perplexed. "Hmm? Why? What else is there to know about it?"

"There was something that the Mother Computer had said," Bowser replied. "I don't remember exactly what it was, but it made me think that there might be something more to it that you don't know."

"Alright, sounds fair," said Daisy. She turned to face Ramona. "And I want *you* to come with me."

"Really?" Ramona said.

"Totally," replied Daisy. "That's cool with you, right?"

Ramona gave Daisy a delicate smile. "Yeah...of course."

On the far north outskirts of the rough and tumble city of Rogueport, two of the mightiest elemental wielders in all of the lands living today marched across the fields with a special, divine companion known to reside in the stars above. A train station entering their sights across the long, open fields, the three beings of exceptional power and the dozens of star-like creatures accompanying them stopped. The cosmic entity accompanying the two hammer-carrying, mustached men shook each of their hands in turn and bowed, to which both the

fire wielder and air wielder bowed in return.

"Thank you greatly for your help in this monumental task," Rosalina said to Mario and Luigi. "Now that we've removed it from this world, no one can get to it. It is in another realm, on another plane, where everything that doesn't fit into our reality goes. This is a substantial preventative measure that should ensure that there will be no meddling with the crypt. We apologize that the process drained you so much, but we specifically required your presence."

Mario gave Rosalina a thumbs up. "Not a problem, Grand Elder. We're glad we expended ourselves for something of this kind of magnitude."

Polari nodded. "It seems as though Rogueport is stable without it, so the extraction has been a success."

"The life force you donated throughout the process should replenish in due time," said Rosalina. "It will be a slow process, so rest as much as you can. Now, even if someone does somehow find it, no elemental wielders can get through to undo any seals; unless they go through you. You're the only ones in this world that know where. This is a heavy responsibility you both now hold; I can not stress this enough."

"It's fine," said Luigi. "We're kinda used to it at this point. Right, bro?"

"Right," said Mario.

"I dunno," said Lubba. "Maybe literally having the weight of the world on your shoulders might be easier than this."

"Nobody will find it, no one will get through," said Mario. " *And* there's a tomb keeper? I'm not worried at all."

"Being proactive has its merits," said Luigi.

Rosalina smiled. "Indeed it does. It's time for my Lumas and I to depart. Are you sure you don't want a direct transport back home?"

"Nah, we're gonna make a couple stops on the way back," said Mario. "It's cool."

"Then godspeed to you, Mario and Luigi," said Rosalina. "Remember, you two. You are *not* to share or discuss what you have seen or experienced with anyone else. Not even with yourselves. This is the last we speak of any of it. It may be even more beneficial for us all if you simply forget all of it. No one of our world, of this world, must know of its existence."

"We understand," said Mario, Luigi giving a nod.

With that, Rosalina and the many Lumas with her warped in a great blue shine of cosmic light and disappeared. That left Mario and Luigi by themselves to resume their walk to the train station ahead. A top-secret affair had left them drained, and they looked forward to catching a train and getting off of their feet for a little while. However, a sudden change just inside of a kilometer to go from the station raised alarm. Both Mario and Luigi sensed an energy signature that reeked of sinister vibes.

"We're done with that place, right..." murmured Luigi. "Why are we still sensing something super bad?"

Mario pointed ahead. "Similar sense, different source..."

In front of and to the left by the base of a hill, a demonic figure of vampiric appearance in clothing colors that combined did not conform to any established elemental wielder code sat atop a boulder. The wicked smile he gave the Mario Bros came into focus as they neared him, as well as the pendant he wore on his neck and the large, cylindrical item slung around his back. Neither brother went much further before stopping their forward progression, both soon becoming aware that the fiend had interest in them. The pendant he wore flashing the glare the faint sunlight beamed on it, Kokoro stood up from the boulder and advanced a few steps towards the Mario Bros.

"Mario," murmured Luigi. "Look...that creepy guy again..."

"Why, hello there," said Kokoro, his tone ominously low and harsh. "I believe we've already met, so we can skip the introductions."

"Someone as ugly as you – yeah, there's no forgetting that," said

Mario.

Kokoro's eyes narrowed, but he did not stop smiling. "You humans are no lookers yourselves either, especially you, with your clownish mustaches; but I digress. There are more important matters to attend to than aesthetics."

"Like what?" asked Luigi.

"So much more than you could ever hope to realize," said Kokoro. "Now that that star fairy with gigantism is out of the picture, there's some business I would like to negotiate with you."

Mario raised an eyebrow. "Have you been waiting here for us?"

"Waiting, watching, observing, spectating, stalking; whatever you would prefer to call it," replied Kokoro. "That was quite a job there that you got through. Certainly no plumbing assignment that would befit those pedestrian overalls, hmm?" He chuckled as Luigi felt a nervous sweat break out on his face, while Mario gained a slight, uneasy scowl. "Yes, I do believe moving something of that magnitude was no easy task, regardless of the assistance you may have had... You both seem so weary; it must've taken a considerable amount of time, effort, and power to transport that palace. Certainly wasn't a one-day job...and I imagine you couldn't just transport that anywhere."

The pendant around Kokoro's neck, now in clear focus as the Alkemei Ankh, flashed in tandem with a deepening of Kokoro's grin. "Unfortunately for you, I have to fulfill the terms of a special bargain – a covenant, if you will – so I will need to know for later use just where exactly you relocated that palace."

Luigi focused his stare on the Alkemei Ankh. "Hey, isn't that one of those pendants that Daisy and her friends all wear? Did you steal that from one of them?"

Kokoro's grin darkened into an amused, perverted sneer. "Me? Steal from them? No, you have it backwards. They stole it from me. Or, at least, they *tried* to. But, with perhaps some of the most incalculable luck, this little gem had found its way back to me..." He grasped the

Ankh's gemstone. "And I assure you, this nifty piece of jewelry is leagues above whatever trinkets any of them sport. But we're not talking about that right now. It is to my understanding that you wiped the palace in question off of this plane of existence. You are to enlighten me of its new whereabouts."

"Sorry, we can't do that," said Mario. "And don't give it any second thought. It's somewhere *you* can't get to."

Kokoro gave a lower chuckle. "Perhaps you misheard. That was not a request. If you cooperate, I will spare you from the eternal damnation I will enact on this wretched world."

"You can't force us to tell you anything," said Luigi.

"Oh, but I can," said Kokoro, marching closer to the brothers. "It's up to you how much pain you wish to endure. I can relate with how some may derive pleasure from it." Light sparkles flickered off of both his natural claws and the claws of his mechanical prosthetic arm. When he stopped his steps, he began fiddling with the object he carried on his back. "I understand you are a pair of formidable elemental wielders. The best fire wielder and air wielder that this world has to offer? Well, I am a more than competent light wielder myself. I also am proficient with magic. In fact, I've decided that I should alter my approach and incorporate more of the mystical side of things along with nature; for maybe I've focused too much on power, and not enough on effect as of late. It can make for a deadly combination, when used correctly."

Kokoro unraveled the object he had on his back, revealing it to be a sizable scroll as he knelt and laid it on the grass. "I propose a challenge. Let's play a game."

"What kind of game?" Mario asked, suspicious of the proposition.

"Do you feel lucky?" asked Kokoro, executing a series of hand signs. "For what I have in mind involves power, skill, wit, *and* luck altogether."

"I don't like this, Mario," Luigi mumbled.

"Surely you're not thinking of backing down," said Kokoro. "Two wielders as prestigious and highly-ranked as yourselves should have no problem accepting this contest...right?"

Kokoro's hands glowed with both golden light power and sparkling magic power. The energies spread to his scroll and raised it overhead of all three wielders. The next thing Mario and Luigi knew, an octagonal light barrier arose around them and Kokoro, enclosing them in a bright, glass-like prison of yellow. Though they had plenty of space to move around inside, there looked to be no way out. Neither Mario nor Luigi could jump beyond the upper limit of Kokoro's light barrier.

"What have you done?!" snapped Mario. "Is trapping us all inside of this a part of your game?"

Kokoro folded his arms, nodding. "I wouldn't recommend touching it. That is, unless you like burns."

Luigi sighed with a shiver. "Mamma mia; it's one of *those* types of games..."

"Well we're not playing it!" Mario declared. "Let us out!"

"You're not in any real position to decline," said Kokoro, standing from his kneeling position. "Now then, the rules are simple. This octagonal light barrier will alternate between expansion and constriction as it randomly rotates. Last one standing wins. Whether it's through concession or dead bodies matters not to me."

"Did you really have to trap us in light just to fight?" asked Mario.

"Not really, but it will prevent you from fleeing," said Kokoro. "It also makes things more interesting; after all, what good's a fight without some agony. And what's a game without a little wager..." He pointed skyward at his scroll, which now floated near the top of the light barrier and had some symbols written on its paper already. "Your souls. That's what's at stake, for this is no mere party game."

"Our souls?" said Luigi. "Wh-what do you want with our souls?!"

"I am in need of pieces for a new collection," said Kokoro. "And I

only accept the highest quality of additions. And since your actions earlier have made it more difficult for me to complete my end of a deal in play, I shall start with *your* spirits. That is, after I pry from you the information I need. I am certain your souls will make fine offerings."

"Hold on – if we win, what do we get?" asked Mario.

"You get to walk out of here alive," Kokoro harshly replied through his grin. "How does that sound? If I were in your position, I'd be more than content with that prize."

Mario smiled. "Fine by us. Two against one doesn't bode well for you. I don't get why you're so confident."

"Yeah," said Luigi. "We've faced worse than you before!"

Kokoro laughed as the Alkemei Ankh flashed several glaring shines from its gem. "You poor, naive fools. The worthless fodder you've conquered on your résumé means nothing here. You know not the forces you are now dealing with. Even despite your recent job, your minds still remain helplessly in the dark... And now, the light will deliver your bodies and souls into oblivion."

In a grand, outdoor hallway-patio a part of a castle above the clouds, a pale, black-haired woman of slight build and ample youth stood up from the table she sat at and drank the last of her tea from her cup. Her Gothic-reminiscent getup of a black, long-sleeved blouse and white skirt over striped black and purple leggings and vintage black shoes seemed disconnected with the modern times; but considering her remote location and lack of either company or roommates, she did not seem so out of place. With one final look at the sunrise before its completion, the girl took a deep breath and stretched. The hime cut bangs of her hair brushed up against her delicate, smiling face when the wind blew.

"Sunrise again," she murmured. "Once again. Such lovely peace."

The girl left the patio and entered her enormous, fluffy castle, a

building better scaled to suit people four times her size. In contrast with her dark and shadowy appearance, the castle interior boasted a rainbow of bright, deep, saturated colors. Copious amounts of toys, action figures, dolls, and stuffed animals sat all throughout the castle, some sized small and others made large. Her bulbous, almond-shaped brown eyes shifted across every room and hallway she went through, a smile full of admiration enlivening her already cheery attitude.

Eventually, she made it to a master bedroom with massive windows taking up more than half of the available wall space. An ornamental, elliptical metal frame nearly seven feet in height hung on the stretch of wall opposite where the bed sat and with a sizable, active Power Vase sitting beside it. With its glass cover, the frame acted as a display case. It was this tall, wide wall mount display that the girl entered the room to look at. More specifically, she gazed at the unconscious shadow wielder in all-purple bound and chained within.

"Perhaps...it might be time, soon," the girl said. "But for now, rest easy. You will reawaken when you're ready. I still need you to produce more power for me, Love. I promise you, I'll make everything right for us. Just like I promised before... You're right where you belong, my dear, beautiful boy... We'll be able to play all day, every day real soon; and *she* won't get in the way..."

She left the room, the sight of the shadow wielder making her happier than before. And yet, she could feel her expression twisting and contorting as annoyance and frustration tried to bubble over to the surface. As she continued through the halls, the image of a certain light wielder lingered in her mind. A six-foot-tall toy soldier in medieval-styled black and gray armor marched up to her and took her empty cup away. At a wave of the girl's hand, the soldier walked down the halls to take the cup to the kitchen. Her now empty palms started twitching, shadows mixed with magic power sparking around her fingers as she mulled over the light wielder still in her thoughts.

"Ramona," the girl said with a sigh. In direct contrast to her predominantly pleasant attitude, her eyes constricted and turned fiercely angular. Tension increased in her face and her body, and her dainty smile morphed into a smirk. Veins protruded all over her skin, and her soft and beauteous hair turned stiff and jagged as a

shining golden silhouette of a four-pronged crown appeared as a mark on her forehead. It was as if something had catalyzed a trigger inside her that had, at least for the moment, changed her into an entirely different person altogether. Her voice shifted as well, keeping its smoothness but transitioning from a lighthearted, elegant tone to a deeper, distorted timber. "Was that truly you? Really now, what were you doing in Mushroom Kingdom?... It has been so long...so, so long... You should hope you don't see me again..."

At a wave of her right hand, a sketchbook materialized in her palm. A specialized eight-color pen also warped into the space above her sketchbook, charged with shadow and magic in each of the color selections it had. As she tapped her pen on her sketchbook, she spoke with the same foreboding voice and expression. "In fact, you're not allowed here. This is a magical place, and a place where dreams come true, and fantasies become reality. This isn't a place for jealous dream crushers like you. Those who crush dreams get crushed themselves... So when you do inevitably find your way here; like I know you will, foolishly thinking you can somehow take him back when his soul now belongs to me; be ready to lose everything. I should punish you *both* for what you two did to me; but I know whose fault it truly was to begin with . "

With a confused grimace, the girl clutched at her head and groaned. Her face, hair, voice, body, and demeanor all gradually relaxed and released the exorbitant tension that had rushed through and altered her. She now appeared as she had before the angered thoughts of the Kruna Yura of Light, Ramona, stormed into her mind. As if aware but unsure of something off that had happened to her, the girl's expression held some concern as she continued on through her castle corridors and drew on a page in her sketchbook. Once she finished her creation, her sketchbook glowed with mystic power expanding upwards in a funnel.

"Prepare to experience a fairy tale unlike no other, Miss Maggie-Lynn," the girl declared, grinning up at her rampant energy. "I'll be sure to give your final chapter the climax it deserves..."

A void. No planet. No land. Only floating islands. Gravity, but no

central mass. Former pieces to something that once was. Now, only suspended in a sky of purple, gold, black, and red. There was no day. There was no night. There was only twilight.

Far away from all else in this realm, a chain of landmasses held a fearsome, ancient structure on their surfaces. Elemental darkness breathed life into the building; but hatred, vanity, intimidation, hunger, and wrath hid deep within. Not a single entity existed on this island chain, aside from two. Only one – a divine being hooded and cloaked entirely in black, purple, and gold, yet not of darkness – floated outside, in front of the central, most significant of the collection of structures. The other, though present, did not have the ability to exit; and as far as the former had a say, the latter would never get out.

A ghoulish roar escaped however, one that the cloaked being did not turn his full attention to. So long as no one appeared near their location, the man in the cloak did not need to pay much mind to the entity within the palace he watched over. He had his main focus directed toward thoughts outside the plane of existence he currently resided in.

"The Alkemei Ankh," he said. "The Master Pendant. The Pendant of Life."

A wispy noise reverberated out of the palace next, though significantly quieter. It was not hard to hear any sounds; for other than the hovering being and whatever went on inside the palace, sound came from nothing but the low ambient hum of distance.

"The ultimate Pendant of Power," the cloaked man said. "For without life, what is there?"

No noise came from inside the palace this time. Though the cloaked man was alone outside and stared out into the vast expanse ahead, he seemed engaged in conversation.

"The Ankh multiplies the user's energy reserves tenfold," he said. "In addition, the user's life force will never deplete, as long as they wear it. They can restore life force and heal others, live or dead, if their body and soul both remain intact. They can donate their own energy

and life force to create new, sentient souls. They may also draw power and matter from the stars and any of the elements to create new bodies... Combined, anyone who dons this Alkemei has the power to create life."

From out of the palace, a moan vibrated alongside a faint purple pulse. The man still did not turn around, but he would have briefly seen a gradient of purple glows through the palace doors and windows. "The Ankh has been regarded as an Alkemei only to be used in emergency situations. Specifically, it was to be used in one of two main scenarios. Whenever a threat arose that affected or had the potential to affect more than just Earth, a worthy soul would wear the Ankh and eradicate the danger. In the second, far more unfavorable scenario, if a calamity struck that brought widespread obliteration and devastation on a colossal scale, the Ankh could be used to help rebuild. At the very least, it could restore or give birth to new life where life used to be."

Again, purple pulsed within the palace, along with what sounded like disgruntled breaths. "In its current state, the impure Ankh's abilities are tainted and corrupted," the man said. "The presence of Osiris, the False Angel and the Shadow Queen's Demon God, within the Ankh blocks its true powers. So long as Osiris is sealed away inside the Ankh, its powers over life are limited. It can not perform as an emergency solution in its current condition. Regardless of its state, it must be returned to Greater Rule. Blinded by vengeance, I had stolen it for my own uses. But it has not been recovered since then."

He still did not turn to face the palace. "All of this, you will not have. You can not have. The Ankh was made for what you had eventually caused. No other Alkemei has the power that the Ankh possesses."

A loud, ghost-like, almost taunting sound reminiscent of a distorted noise from a tunnel then eased out from the palace behind the man. The purple glow within the palace rose and decayed with the noise.

"The Orianthi came close..." the cloaked man said. "But even its reanimation ability pales in comparison... However, one other Alkemei could rival it. One kept hidden as the final safety net. It may not equal the Ankh, but it shouldn't. It works through different means and has abilities in an entirely incomparable class."

All the animation and noise from within the palace stopped.

"The Alkemei Vranzer, the Pendant of Fate..." the cloaked man said. "In the right hands, it will right your wrongs."

As if displeased, a guttural, demonic rumble rippled out of the palace. The cloaked man maintained his hover, unfazed.

"I hope to see its owner soon, with my own eyes," he said. "I believe fate will make that an actuality."

Rather aggressively, a purple glow reemerged from within the palace and pulsed out in ebbs and flows. The most ghastly, yet most organic, of the noises produced within the palace then breached the structure's doors and windows, as if trying to claw its way out and then storm unhindered into the open. Finally, the cloaked man turned and faced the palace behind him. He sensed impatience. He also sensed someone else.

A brown Shy Guy with a cracked gunmetal gray mask and yellow-accented gunmetal armor marched out of the palace's front doors. The Mirror Shield attached to his right arm and the staffed, pickax-jackhammer tool known as the Povado Thumper strapped around his back gave glossy shines, despite the lack of sunlight in their surreal world. The Shy Guy gazed up at the floating cloaked man and gestured to the palace behind them.

"You're probably aware of how restless she's getting," the Shy Guy said. "I'm sure she's just itching for one of her fail-safes to pull through and free her."

The cloaked man gave a nod. "When did you get here, Arka? I thought you were busy."

"I was," Arka Knight replied. "But I had to return to see what they had accomplished. It seems to me like this is just a desperate bid for time, ironically in a timeless dimension."

"That's all that can be done," the cloaked man said. "Delay the inevitable, until the time is right. Despite our efforts, Osiris will eventually find his way here, and the Vranzer's owner will follow.

They'll come to the Chaos Realm, looking for her... But, not right away, however... It looks like the owner will have to rescue her friend first. I sense a dangerous, unstable soul fueled with jealousy, lust, wrath, and vengeance...and yet, it seems...disguised, somehow... The owner of the Vranzer must be extremely wary of this entity when they cross paths..."

"I have full belief that she will use the Vranzer to its fullest capabilities," said Arka Knight.

"You should. You're the one that risked breaking the laws of order and the universe to even select her, never mind your meddling across timelines."

"It will be worth it. If the Great Beings and the rulers that be are mad with me for bending a handful of regulations to prevent the destructive spread of chaos and discord, then so be it. We don't need other realms erased *or* turning into this one. Besides, I see I'm not the only one cheating time right now. There's another rogue out there they should be concerned with instead of me."

"That water wielder..."

"Yes, he has quite the infamous reputation in the world many millennia beyond the present time. I have already jumped ahead and seen what this temporal warrior of chaos is capable of. At least he only seems focused on one target, but that could be enough to ruin everything."

The cloaked man paused for a moment. "Will you aid them?"

Arka Knight made a dismissive laugh. "I'm not their babysitter. If my chosen wielder uses the Vranzer properly, then I should not even need to show up at all. I've pulled enough strings as it is. The rest is up to her and her friends."

The End.

…

…

…?